Professional Boundaries and Social Networking

Technology does not expand the boundaries of what is regarded as generally accepted professional boundaries between employees and students. Technology merely presents new causes for concern and reminders to employees about what constitutes professional boundaries with students.

In 1900, teachers did not take students on buggy rides into the country alone; in 1925 through 1985, teachers did not make personal phone calls to students to socialize; and today, there is no reason for teachers or other school employees to engage in social networking with students of a personal nature. Parents have a reasonable expectation that their children’s teachers will not be sending personal text-messages or Facebook messages to their children at 11:00 at night or any other time of day. Sexual predator experts describe such behavior as inappropriate boundary invasions akin to touching a child. Administrators should consider social networking by staff with students of a personal nature to be “electronic touching” and deal with it through written discipline.

Inappropriate electronic communications with students include emails of a personal nature, text messaging, instant messaging, and use of social networking online services and platforms such as Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, Second Life, YouTube, Blogs, LinkedIn, and Google+. Except in rare and infrequent situations, there is no valid educational or business reason for such electronic communications or social networking containing private and personal communications between a school employee and a student.

There are narrow exceptions to this rule. Some school sponsored electronic communications with students should be allowed: on-line classes or schools; class communications posted through a school websites; as well as special class or school Facebook pages. The common denominator for these exceptions is transparency. They should be governed by written rules which the employee must follow. School administration should have access to all postings. All postings should be for the educational purposes of the particular class, and not for social or personal purposes. Most importantly, parents should be able to monitor the communications too. In order to allow this to occur, parents need to be informed as to how they may monitor these sites.

The Washington State School Directors Association has propounded the first boundary invasion model board policy in the nation, BP 5253 and 5353P. Every three years schools are required to train employees about mandatory child abuse reporting duties. When such training takes place, it would be useful to also train employees concerning professional boundaries and what constitutes an inappropriate boundary invasion. Social networking with students is now high on the list of what constitutes an inappropriate boundary invasion against students. School administrators would do well to remind their staffs of this fact at the beginning of each school year.

Thank you to Donald F. Austin, MAT, JD, with the law firm of Patterson Buchanan Fobes Leitch & Kalzer for this article. The firm has offices in Seattle (206) 462-6700 and Portland (800) 722-3815.