

School teachers, school boards and the question of political neutrality

30 July 2026

Ahead of a general election, it is timely to recap if/how the principle of political neutrality applies to school teachers and school boards. Acting in a politically neutral manner is one of five public service principles that are set out in section 12 of the Public Service Act 2020 (**“the Act”**). These public service principles are designed to support the Government to develop and implement policies and generally support democratic and constitutional government.

Are school teachers part of the public service?

As the name suggests, the public service principles apply to the *public service*. School teachers are not part of the *public service*, because neither the teachers nor their employing school boards fall within the statutory definition of the term “public service” in section 10 of the Act. This means that the public service principle of acting “in a politically neutral manner” does not directly apply to school teachers.

But aren’t school teachers employed by a Crown entity?

It is correct that school boards are *Crown entities*. This is a relevant consideration because the Act gives the Public Service Commissioner certain powers to set minimum standards of integrity and conduct as well as being able to issue statutory guidance on integrity and conduct that can be applied to Crown entities. These powers were exercised earlier this year when the Commissioner issued-

- a. the [Code of Conduct for the Public Sector](#) pursuant to section 17 of the Act, and
- b. [General Election Guidance 2026](#) pursuant to section 19 of the Act.

Although these documents impart obligations of political neutrality on some Crown entities, the Commissioner has not issued the documents to school boards. In fact, school boards are expressly exempt from coverage. Consequently, the documents do not apply to the employees of school boards either.

What does the Code of Professional Responsibility for teachers say about political neutrality?

The code of professional responsibility for the teaching profession that was formerly issued and maintained by the Teaching Council and that will now be established/maintained by the Secretary for Education¹ does not presently contain a duty of political neutrality. To avoid misunderstanding, this does not mean that any political action is permissible at work. Obligations around professional boundaries, managing your own assumptions and beliefs and respecting learners’ diverse backgrounds do exist and continue to apply. The key distinction is however that a failure to maintain political neutrality does not in itself constitute a breach of teachers’ professional obligations.

Do school board members owe a duty of political neutrality?

Yes. School board members are bound by a [code of conduct](#)² pursuant to section 166 of the Education and Training Act 2020 which sets out the following requirement:

I am politically impartial in my role as board member- I do not endorse or campaign for a political party or candidate in my capacity as a school board member

There are two obvious limitations to this obligation:

- a. The obligation only applies when the board member is acting in their capacity as a school board member. What board members do in a personal capacity is not captured by the code.
- b. The limitation only applies to the school board members- it does not apply more broadly to employees of the school board (i.e. the school's teaching staff).

What about other codes of conduct?

The Secretary for Education has the ability to issue a code of conduct that applies to the entire education service pursuant to section 598 of the Education and Training Act 2020. However, we understand that this power has not been exercised.³ We are aware that some schools have issued their own codes of conduct to staff. However, it is PPTA Te Wehengarua's view that schools should not purport to create professional conduct obligations that fall outside those set out in the code of professional responsibility. Doing so anyway could expose the board to liability if the school sought to enforce these standards.

Could teachers' obligations change ahead of the 2026 general election?

Yes. If this were to happen, PPTA Te Wehengarua members would be provided with updated information.