

Safe interactions with students

Teaching and learning relationships.



Awareness

In all relationships with students, teachers must remain aware of the authority they have, which derives both from their professional position and the difference in age. Because of the power imbalance which exists between teacher and student, teachers must accept that it is their responsibility to control and positively model the nature of the relationships.

Responsibility

As professionals, teachers have a responsibility to act in an ethical way and to encourage their colleagues to do likewise. They have an obligation to maintain a high standard of conduct.

Behaviours which put teachers at risk

The following situations put teachers at risk and represent unacceptable behaviour either in or out of school:

- » Becoming over-familiar with students, through failing to maintain a professional distance. This includes the use of cell phone, email messaging and social networking sites.
- » Entering rooms where students are dressing. PE staff, coaches, cultural group leaders, drama teachers and participants in school camps are particularly vulnerable.
- » Invading a student's personal space by, for example, leaning over them closely at a desk.
- » Touching students in any way that can be construed as inappropriate, assault and/or sexual harassment.
- » Using any sexual name to refer to a student or group of students or tolerating students' use of such language.
- » Making sexist remarks.
- » Commenting on a student's physical development, either to students or colleagues.
- » Spending time privately with individual students.
- » Having intimate or sexual relationships with students.
- » Leading a student to believe that a relationship could be more than a professional one.
- » Accessing pornographic or erotic material or allowing students to distribute it or download it from a computer.
- » Condoning or encouraging students to use alcohol or drugs.

In these situations, it is the feelings or impressions of the student or the complainant which may prompt complaints about teachers under STCA 3.3 (ASTCA 2.4). The result of a disciplinary process may be a formal warning, or dismissal of the teacher and/or deregistration. Criminal charges could also be laid.

Authority for defining professional behaviour

- » The PPTA Te Wehengarua Code of Ethics makes it plain that members have a duty to confront and prevent the behaviours described. Therefore the PPTA Te Wehengarua branch must seek to ensure that its members behave ethically at all times.
- » Your school's charter, by its general statements on equity, and its specific requirement for the school to have policy and procedures to create and maintain a positive and healthy environment that supports the rights of students (and staff) to be free from all forms of harassment from all persons.
- » The Employment Relations Act 2000 requires employers to ensure employees have a harassment-free environment and gives employees personal grievance provisions for protection against harassment.
- » The Human Rights Act 1993 gives protection to students and teachers against discrimination, including sexual harassment.
- » The collective employment agreements under which teachers are employed refer to their rights to take personal grievances (STCA Part 9, ASTCA Part 8).
- » The Crimes Act 1961 sets out specific criminal offences.

Responsibilities and support

If a branch member becomes aware of any of the behaviours described above, or behaviours similar to those described, there are several courses of action available. They include:

- » Reporting the behaviour to appropriate people in the school.
- » Branch/staff discussion on general principles and revision of school policy and procedures.
- » Seeking advice from PPTA Te Wehengarua field officers.

Guidelines and resources

Guidelines for teachers' professional conduct are set out in:

- » The Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Teaching Profession

These can be found on the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand's website (teachingcouncil.nz) under Our Code, Our Standards.

- » The Code of Ethics (fourth schedule) of the PPTA Te Wehengarua Constitution

This can be found at ppta.org.nz under PPTA Te Wehengarua Constitution

Guidelines to help keep staff and students safe in the digital world can be found on the ICT Advisory Committee community page at ppta.org.nz

The teaching council has a number of guidelines and resources on its website.

Who to contact

The PPTA Te Wehengarua women's officer and field officers can provide additional advice, including workshops for professional development programmes.

For further advice contact your local PPTA Te Wehengarua field office, 0800 630 400 or visit ppta.org.nz

You can find details for your local field office on the 'contact us' page of the PPTA Te Wehengarua website.