

# Safe Interaction with Students

## Precautions for Northshore School District employees regarding touching, talking, writing and activities

### A Changing Society

Working with students on a one-to-one academic basis can be rewarding. However, expectations of society have changed. Professional/personal relationships have been redefined. The protection of persons under 18 years of age from abuse and sexual harassment is a critical aspect of court action and case law today.

Specific language that will protect employees is difficult to convey because the subject matter has many gray areas. For that reason, these guidelines for Northshore School District employees may err on the side of caution. If you have further questions or concerns, discuss them with your supervisor.

### Playing It Safe

WAC 180-87-040 defines a student as:

- a. Any student who is under the supervision, direction or control of the educational employee.
- b. Any student enrolled in any school or school district served by the employee.
- c. Any student enrolled in any school or school district while attending a school-related activity at which the employee is performing professional duties.
- d. Any former student under 18 years of age who has been under the supervision, direction or control of the educational employee.



Touching children carries a risk. An employee can be accused of impropriety, unnecessary physical contact or even sexual harassment. Being alone with a student can prompt an allegation of intimacy if care is not taken. A finding of sexual harassment is just cause for disciplinary action in this school district. Other consequences include legal action, loss of employment and cancellation of professional certification.

### Exercising Good Judgment

A school employee must exercise conscious judgment in determining whether or not to touch students and under what conditions. It is important to consider several factors:

### Age of Student

#### Grades K-3

It is virtually impossible to avoid physical contact with or touching students of this age in the classroom. However, as students grow older, the acceptability of touching and hugging decreases.

#### Grades 4-9

Female students in this age group are very conscious of their sexuality. The most numerous accusations of improper touching occur during this period. Female students may view a touch on the shoulder or back as sexual in nature. They are extremely sensitive regarding remarks about their clothing and physical appearance. School employees typically get into trouble for patting knees, putting arms around shoulders, putting hands on waists, or “looking at me funny.” Girls often complain of being touched on their backs over their bras.

#### Grades 10-12

Very little touching is acceptable with this group. Employees often get into trouble when they attempt to counsel troubled students in this age group, especially about sexual or romantic matters.

### Employee Gender

Males are perceived as sexual aggressors; thus, most accusations are leveled against male employees. Male employees must review their behavior very carefully so it cannot be misinterpreted.

### Cultural and Personal Factors

Some individuals and some cultures are very uncomfortable with any sort of touching. If a student indicates by word or action that he/she is uncomfortable, the employee should avoid physical contact with that student except for safety reasons.

## Some Areas of Caution

Some actions by school employees, even if not tainted with improper motive, are common trouble areas. Avoid these situations when possible:

- Assigning a single student to come in early to set up for a class or gym activity.
- Social activities with students, such as inviting them to your home or taking one or two students to a movie.
- Driving a student in your car, particularly a male coach driving female players home.
- Giving a gift to a student, especially an expensive or personal gift.
- Writing personal cards, notes or letters to students. Be particularly careful of yearbook inscriptions and sign your full professional name, not a nickname or first name.
- Using a personal account to originate email, online chat or text message to current or past students. This can be of particular concern if the topic is not specifically connected to instruction.

## Other Actions

Other actions are very difficult to explain and could be grounds for discipline:

- Any request for affection, such as “Give me a hug” or “Come sit on my lap.”
- Any touching except the shoulders, back and arms. Even this is dangerous with girls in grades 4-9. Avoid lingering touches such as shoulder massages.
- Request for sex or for dates.
- Lewd or sexual remarks, jokes or other sexual overtures. This means remarks like: “I wish my wife was built like you” or “You have great legs.” Comments on appearance or dress are in a gray area; “You’re a pretty girl” or “That sweater was made for you.”
- Touching girls differently than boys; e.g., hugging girls but not boys. This may not be sexual behavior, but it’s seen as sexist behavior and may be grounds for discipline.
- Sexual contact with any student (even a former student under the age of 18).

## Safe Verbal Communications

- Avoid sexual comments.
- Avoid sexist remarks.
- Avoid innuendo and double meanings.
- Talk to all students in the same manner.



## Safe Interaction with Students

- Keep an open door when meeting alone with a student.
- Treat all students in the same manner.
- It’s better not to single out a student through favoritism, special privileges or gifts.
- Don’t spend too much time with one student or group of students.
- Keep your supervisor advised of planned excursions, student rewards or special activities off campus.
- Get parental permission.
- Take more than one student.

**For more information contact: Northshore Human Resources Department at (425) 408-7601, Doug Hale, Executive Director, at (425) 408-7605 or Abel Ghirmai, Director, at (425) 408-7622.**