



Staff and Student Professional Boundaries Policy			
Drafted by	Risk and Compliance Officer	Date of Last Review	February 2023
Responsibility	School Executive Principal	For Distribution	Staff, Students and Parents

Source of Obligation

Ministerial Order 1359 – Child Safe Standards – Managing the risk of child abuse in schools and school boarding premises.

Purpose

Westbourne Grammar School staff hold a unique position of influence, authority, trust and power in relation to students at the school. As such, it is their duty, at all times, to maintain professional boundaries with students.

A breach of Staff and Student Professional Boundaries may in some circumstances be a criminal offence. The Crimes Act 1958 (Vic) includes certain offences for persons, including teachers, Direct Contact Volunteers and Direct Contact Contractors, whose position places them in a position of care, supervision or authority, with a student. For more information, refer to [Offences Under the Crimes Act 1958 \(Vic\)](#).

The following policy and guidelines are designed to raise awareness of situations where professional boundary violations may occur and some strategies to minimise the risk of boundary violations. The practicing of protective behaviours at all times will also reduce the possibility of vexatious claims being brought against staff.

Scope

For the purpose of this policy *only*, the term “staff” includes all teaching and non-teaching staff (including casual and relief staff) as well as Amici-Westbourne Early Learning staff, volunteers who could potentially have direct unsupervised contact with students during the normal course of providing the volunteer service (including homestay families, sports coaches, contract cleaners, grounds staff and maintenance workers) (“Direct Contact Volunteers”).

In addition, this policy will also apply to all contractors, external providers and other people engaged to conduct the business of the school who may have contact with students during the course of their engagement.

Staff and Student Professional Boundaries apply in all school environments. School environments include, physical, virtual and online environments used during or outside school hours, as well as any environment (including those outside the school’s grounds) where school-related activities are occurring.

Teachers registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) must also comply with principles set out in [The Victorian Teaching Profession’s Code of Conduct](#) (VIT Code of Conduct).



Westbourne Grammar School Policy

Westbourne Grammar School is committed to providing a safe physical and emotional environment where all of our students are respected and treated with dignity in an appropriate professional and caring manner where the risk of child abuse is minimised, and a safe and supportive child safe environment is maintained.

It is our policy that:

- Staff exercise their responsibilities in a way that recognises professional boundaries with regard to their relationships with students at all times.
- Staff identify, discourage, reject and report any advances of a sexual nature initiated by a student.
- Staff interaction with students is professional at all times, including inside and outside of school hours.
- Conflict of interest issues must be reported to the Principal.
- Equal learning opportunities are given to each student without discrimination.
- Appropriate consequences will be applied to staff who breach professional boundaries.

What are Professional Boundaries?

Professional boundaries are parameters that describe the limits of a relationship in circumstances where one person (a student) entrusts their welfare and safety to another person (a staff member), in circumstances where a power imbalance exists.

The fact that school staff are in a unique position of trust, care, authority and influence with students means that there is always an inherent power imbalance that exists between them. It also means that professional boundaries must be established, maintained and respected at all times.

In most cases this power imbalance is clear, however, sometimes it may be more difficult to recognise, especially for younger staff members who may only be a few years older than their students.

The following guidelines are not exhaustive and given that sometimes 'grey areas' may occur, it is expected that all staff (no matter their age or experience) use their own good judgement, think very carefully of the implications and potential consequences of engaging in certain behaviours with students and always err on the side of caution.

When unsure about whether professional boundaries are given, or have been breached, ask yourself:

- Would I modify my behaviour if a colleague was present?
- How would I feel about explaining my actions at a staff meeting?
- Am I sharing information for the student's benefit, or for my benefit?
- Am I dealing with this student differently from others in similar circumstances?
- Is my language or demeanour different from normal when dealing with this particular student?



Intimate Relationships

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any student that is, or can be misinterpreted as, having a romantic or sexual, rather than professional basis. This is regardless of whether the relationship is consensual, non-consensual or condoned by parents/carers.

Such relationships have a negative impact on the teaching and learning of students and colleagues and may carry a serious reputational risk for the staff member and, in turn, the school.

The professional relationship of staff and students may be breached by:

- flirtatious behaviour or dating
- development of an intimate personal relationship
- sexual relations
- the use of sexual innuendo, inappropriate language and/or material with students
- unwarranted and inappropriate touching
- unwarranted and inappropriate filming or photography
- deliberate exposure to sexual behaviour of others (e.g. pornography)
- having intimate contact without a valid context via written or electronic means (e.g. email, letters, telephone, text messages, social media sites or chatrooms)
- going out, whether alone or in company, to social events such as the movies or dinner
- exchanging gifts of a personal nature that encourages the formation of an intimate relationship.

Relationships with Former Students

Staff should also be aware that developing or encouraging romantic or sexual relationships with recent former students (over 18 years of age) may violate professional boundaries and are strongly discouraged from doing so.

The imbalance of power and authority that exists in the staff/student relationships does not suddenly disappear after the student finishes their schooling. Staff should not assume that they will be protected from disciplinary action by claiming that a relationship began only after the student left the school as there may be a reasonable belief that the emotional intimacy of the relationship developed while the staff/student relationship existed.

For registered teachers, it is a breach of the VIT Code of Conduct for a teacher to have a sexualised relationship with a former student:

- within two years of the learner completing their senior secondary schooling or equivalent; and
- in all circumstances, the former student must be at least 18 years old before a relationship commences.

In addition, if any staff member engages in a romantic/sexual relationship with a person who was previously a student at the school, this may generate concerns that the staff member previously crossed professional boundaries while the former student was under the care of the staff member. In particular, concerns may arise that the staff member engaged in grooming behaviour while the person was still a student.



The school will investigate any complaint that a staff member has abused their position and acted unprofessionally by engaging in a relationship with a former student. In considering whether there has been a breach of professional boundaries, the school may take the following factors into account:

- the nature of the relationship, including its closeness, dependence and significance
- the length of the relationship while the former student was attending the school
- any conduct the staff member undertook which gives cause for concern
- the length of time that has passed between when the person was a student at the school and the commencement of the relationship.

By ensuring that their relationships with Westbourne Grammar School students do not breach Staff and Student Professional Boundaries, a staff member who subsequently forms a relationship with a former student will be less likely to be considered to have breached professional boundaries in relation to that former student, provided that the former student is at least 18 years old and at least two years have passed between the time when the former student concluded their senior secondary schooling and the commencement of the relationship.

Personal Relationships

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any student that is or can be perceived or misinterpreted as having a personal rather than professional element. This is regardless of whether the relationship is consensual, non-consensual, or condoned by parents or carers.

It is the student's **perception** of staff behaviour and not the intention of the staff member that is important.

An established and expected professional relationship between staff and students may be compromised by staff:

- attending parties or socialising with students outside of organised school events (without parental/carer permission)
- sharing personal details about their private lives with students
- meeting with students outside of school hours without permission from the school.

Staff must recognise at all times that their role is not to be a "friend" or "parent" to a student.

Fair Learning Opportunities

The main focus of teaching is effective student learning and, as such, teachers are expected to support their students with their professional expertise so as to offer them the best education in their individual circumstances. The quality of teaching and learning between teachers and students characterises their relationship.

Teachers should demonstrate their commitment to student learning by:

- maintaining a safe and challenging learning environment that promotes mutual respect
- recognising and developing each student's abilities, skills and talents by catering to their individual abilities and respecting their individual differences
- encouraging students to develop and reflect on their own values
- interacting with students without bias



- not engaging in preferential treatment
- not discriminating against any student on the basis of race, sex, sexuality, disability or religious or political conviction
- always making decisions in students' best interests.

Electronic Communications between Staff & Students

It is expected that all staff will adhere to the following guidelines:

- All use of technology should be for educational purposes or for the organization of co-curricular activities.
- All email communication between staff and students should be via the school email system and reflect a professional staff/student relationship.
- Staff should not communicate with students where it is not in a professional context.
- Staff should not give out their personal telephone numbers or social media contact details.
- Staff are not to accept or request students as 'friends' on social media or otherwise use social media to communicate in any way that is not condoned or approved by the school, this applies to former students that have left the school within the last 2 years.
- Staff should not exchange personal pictures with a student.
- Teachers are not expected or encouraged to respond to concerns of parents/carers or students on holidays, weekends or in the evening.
- Any student personal contact numbers or other personal contact details made available to the school should only be used for school communications.

Physical Contact with Students

All staff should be aware that situations may arise that can be perceived in a manner that was not intended. For this reason, all staff at the school should adhere to the following guidelines for contact with students both in and outside of school grounds:

- Staff should avoid unnecessary physical contact with students
- Minimal, non-lingering, non-gratuitous physical contact in the context of the situation is acceptable (e.g. congratulatory pat on the back or handshake)
- Physical contact to provide first aid treatment is acceptable
- Physical contact for sport, drama and dance instruction is acceptable in a class situation but not in a 1:1 situation. If physical contact is required for specific technical instructions, it must be brief and only with the consent of the student.

Note: A student may withdraw consent for this contact either verbally or gesturally and staff must remain vigilant whilst engaging in necessary contact situations. Once consent has been withdrawn no further physical contact can be or should be made.

Off-Campus Excursions and Camps

During off-campus excursions or camps, the same physical contact guidelines apply as well as the following:



- Checking of sleeping arrangements, or supervising of students changing should be done, where possible, with another staff member present and always in a manner that respects students' privacy and personal space.
- Staff may enter a student's room or dormitory in circumstances that relate to student wellbeing. In these instances, staff should always knock and advise of presence prior to entering a room or dormitory.
- Ensure that while in a bedroom or dormitory, a strict staff/student relationship is upheld and that inappropriate behaviour, such as sitting on a student's bed, is not undertaken.

Managing Conflicts of Interest

Where personal relationships with students such as family relationships and close family networks exist, questions of conflicts of interest may arise.

In these circumstances, staff need to be far more diligent in developing and maintaining these boundaries.

Where a staff member feels that a conflict of interest may exist, they should notify the Principal, or the Chair of the Board if the conflict involves the Principal and arrangements should be implemented to avoid the conflict situation if possible. For example, teaching of students by a staff member with a conflict should be avoided.

Any significant decisions relating to these students (such as the appointment of classes or selection in sports teams) should be referred to another staff member and endorsed by a supervisor.

Where the school deems it necessary to direct a staff member to take certain action/s to mitigate a conflict, the action/s must be adhered to. Staff members who do not adhere to this will be considered in breach of this policy, which may result in disciplinary action.

Disclosure of Staff/Student Interactions

To enable the school to be aware of appropriate and inappropriate interactions between staff and students, it is Westbourne Grammar School's policy that all staff are encouraged to declare any interactions with students outside school hours by completing a COI Declaration Form.

These interactions may include instances where the staff member is:

- related to the student
- friends with the student's parents or family
- given parental consent to interact with the student for academic purposes outside of school hours and has notified the school.

Westbourne Grammar School maintains records of all declarations made by staff members related to their interactions with students, or relationships with students, that exist outside of school hours or school premises.



These records are kept in accordance with our [Child Safe Record Keeping](#) and Human Resources Management policies.

Staff Responsibilities

All staff are expected to:

- follow the guidelines as set out in this policy
- immediately report and conflicts of interest
- remove themselves from decision making where a conflict has been identified.

Implementation

This policy will be implemented through a combination of:

- staff training and development in professional conduct
- effective management of staff engaging in inappropriate relationships with students
- effective management of conflicts of interest
- effective communication and incident notification procedures
- effective record-keeping procedures
- initiation of correct actions where necessary.

Breach of Policy

The school will consider each breach to this policy in the context in which it has occurred and determine if the relevant severity of the breach. A serious breach may result in disciplinary actions, up to and/or including disciplinary action that may include (depending on the severity of the breach):

- remedial education
- counselling
- increased supervision
- the restriction of duties
- suspension or
- in the case of serious breaches, termination of employment, contract or engagement.

Related Policies

- Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy
- Child Safety Code of Conduct
- Conflict of Interest Policy
- Reportable Conduct Policy
- Social Media Policy
- Student Duty of Care Policy