

MAINTAINING ROLE AND BOUNDARY AWARENESS WHEN TEACHING REMOTELY IN A TIME OF CRISIS: BEING ALERT TO THE CHALLENGES OF ONE-ON-ONE ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

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With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, most schools have instituted remote learning. We are fortunate that so many schools and families have access to the technology to make this possible. Not surprisingly, the sudden and unexpected shift to remote learning comes with many challenges. One particular issue that may be overlooked is the potential for missteps in teacher – student relationships due to increased opportunities for unobserved electronic one-on-one communications.

Students may be communicating with teachers via email, text, or video conferencing for questions, support, and feedback. Under normal circumstances, such conversations would occur in scheduled and routine school settings. But these are not normal times. New schedules and routines are just being established. And, significantly, everyone is under stress.

Teachers, of course, care deeply for their students. It is only natural for them to be concerned about students who are experiencing disruption and anxiety in this uncertain time. When having one-on-one communication with a student who is distressed, teachers may inadvertently slip out of their professional role into a counseling or parenting role. Teachers are particularly susceptible to having a “rescue mentality” when a student is struggling emotionally. While it is appropriate for teachers to provide reassurance to students and to encourage them to be calm, it is not the role of teachers to



serve as emotional support providers to students. In this time of high stress and anxiety, it is especially important for teachers to maintain role awareness so that they stay in their professional role. Teachers are educators. They are neither counselors nor parents to their students. If a student is in distress, the teacher should notify the student's parents, the school's counselor, and appropriate administrators. A group decision can then be made how to appropriately support the student.

Classroom and school schedules help students and teachers maintain appropriate boundaries throughout the school day. With remote learning, those established boundaries of time and place no longer exist. Under such circumstances, it is especially important for teachers to maintain boundary awareness. One-on-one communications should be as transparent and unambiguous as possible. They should be scheduled and time-limited and parents and administrators should be aware of the schedule. If anything concerning arises in the course of such communications, it should be immediately shared, as appropriate, with parents, counselors, and administrators.

Maintaining role and boundary awareness is important at all times for educators. It is especially important when schools are shifting abruptly to electronic communications which have the potential to strain roles and erode boundaries. Schools should alert teachers to the behavioral risks inherent to remote instruction. Teachers should be instructed to notify parents and administrators immediately of any concerns relating to students. Teachers also need to take care of themselves. They are not immune to the stresses of this pandemic. It is important that teachers be alert to how their personal and family situations are impacting the way they interact with students. It is common in these times to share details of our personal lives with colleagues, friends, and family. It is important to remember that students are not colleagues, friends, or family. Excessive self-disclosure is a boundary issue that can contribute to role confusion.

Given that the shift to remote learning has occurred so suddenly and unexpectedly, most teachers are likely focusing on instructional and technical issues. Teachers may not be thinking about the behavioral issues inherent to remote instruction. This is a good time to bring this issue to their consciousness. Hopefully, this crisis will soon pass. But while we are all dealing with this crisis, it is particularly important for teachers engaged in one-on-one electronic communications with students to vigilantly maintain role and boundary awareness for the benefit of students, themselves, and the entire school community.