

**Twenty-First Century Teachers:
Managing Relationships, Technology and Boundaries**

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ABSTRACT

Teachers in K-12 schools are placed in classrooms each day with little or no training on how to manage technology and student relationships. Since the early 1980s, inappropriate relationships between teacher and student have increased at an alarming rate, resulting in civil litigation against the teacher and the school district. Administrators have failed to address this topic due to its sensitivity and taboo nature. Teachers at all grade levels are setting personal policy on this topic as a function of administrator default.

Twenty-first Century Teachers: Managing Relationships, Technology and Boundaries

When was the last time at an after-school faculty meeting that your building principal or administrator talked about boundary issues between teachers and students? The answer to this question is probably never. These issues are often considered 'taboo': something too close to our hearts that is difficult to talk about and deal with. Each teacher in Michigan's K-12 schools walks into his or her classroom and has a slightly different style of teaching. This style includes one of the most important factors in education: emotional intelligence and how each individual deals and copes with students. Each teacher has his or her own set of social space and boundary issues that are pre-established by that teacher's sense of well-being and own personal ethics. The colleges, universities and school districts from where each teacher has experiences give no direction or training on this important and difficult topic. Additionally, staff/student administrative policies and handbooks offer little support concerning this challenging subject. As a result, student-to-teacher or teacher-to-student sexual liaison relationships occur, and could be easily avoided, with proper administrative training, teacher insight and changes in executive policies.

Unfortunately, inappropriate relationships between teachers and students happen at a greater rate than many Michigan teachers are aware. In an attempt to avoid publicity and press, some of these situations are brushed under the carpet and kept quiet or confidentiality agreements in settlement cases are reached. Oftentimes, when the case does work its way into the public arena, an implosion that is difficult to ever recover from occurs. As a result from both the

criminal stream of activity and the civil suit that usually follows the criminal action, many lives are destroyed and reputations tarnished for a lifetime. Once the civil suit happens and lawyers get involved, the war games between plaintiff and defendant begin and this drags on for multiple years with many people being named in the civil suit. The influences of technology and mass media have contributed to coping and dealing with this topic, both for administrators and teachers. For example, if one were to look at the TV show *90210* (2011) and look at the advertisements and images portrayed in 1990, it would display a cast of approximately ten young adults, fully clothed. If you were to show that same visual image in 2009 in the resurgence of this TV program *90210*, we would see a cast of ten in the pool wearing very little clothing and in revealing and provocative poses. This and many other examples of visual imagery as a function of mass media have changed how we see the roles of relationships. If we were to look at an Abercrombie and Fitch ad from 1990, we would see fully-clothed models displaying winter clothing. If we were to look at the equivalent winter add in 2011, (2011) we would see many differences in dress, demeanor and what was revealed in a suggestive manner. Therefore, since the onset of the 1990s, we have seen four large societal shifts in how we deal with technology and mass media and its influences on teachers, students and administrators.

I. American Language Issues

Who would have guessed if you started teaching in 1970 or 1980 that the word “suck” would become a mainstream, acceptable word? Back in the 1970s, students often received suspensions for using the words “sucks” because it had a sexually-oriented connotation. Now it is just used as a word to display a dislike of some topic. This creep has occurred with many

language issues, and if one were to turn on the TV and watch a local football game in decades past, the word “f__k” would be bleeped out entirely. If you were to watch Nitro Circus, for instance, or a football game, the “f” and the “k” are not bleeped out—it is only the center portion of the word that is deleted, and it’s clear what the speaker on the television version is saying. Small changes have influenced our way of thinking, and they do affect the classroom.

II. Influences of No Child Left Behind

It’s hard to realize that No Child Left Behind has been around for over a decade and has made a major impact on how we deal with students in schools. Administrators were instructed to elevate standardized test scores, and they put much energy into powering that; yet as a result and due in part to the finite amount of effort that they can make, matters like emotional intelligence and other aspects of relationship-building were cast aside to focus on the huge effort of raising standardized test scores. This, too, pushed much of this topic underground and left the teachers to fend for themselves in how they would establish their own set of intrinsic and personal boundary regulations.

III. Internet Expansion

One topic that we try to regulate in schools is the use of the internet and inappropriate places and websites, although this is a difficult piece to manage since students have the ability to use the internet outside of school and can see many visual images of just about anything they wish to surf and discover. This aspect of boundary issues with Facebook and social networking has changed the dimensions of how we treat students at school. It also enters a new western

frontier of regulations that are not in place due to the internet expansion void at school. If we were to look at a middle school or high school faculty handbook, there would probably be very little written about policies on whether or not teachers should have a Facebook account, how they regulate their personal account, or if there should be a separate school-related Facebook account. These details are generally void in staff handbooks and manuals. This, too, brings further confusion for the teacher, and directions in how to manage this overwhelming topic of privacy and teacher behavior are necessary.

IV. Technology and Visual Imagery

Who would have guessed that on a hot Saturday in the middle of July, a student could take a picture of a teacher at an outdoor marine-related activity, post it on the internet, and the teacher—50 miles from school, in the middle of summer break—would ultimately end up losing her job? These concerns are prevalent with the use of cell phones and other contemporary topics and conceptualizations of how teachers manage their professional lives and private lives. Cell phones and technology expansion have complicated and confused this issue about what is accepted and what is inappropriate. Each person and administrator might have a slightly different definition of this, creating greater topical confusion.

V. Life Skills as a School Curriculum Area: Lost and Forgotten

Socializing of our students in appropriate settings has become more topical. We deal with things like bullying and behavior in relation to what is accepted in the classroom. As far as rules and regulations are concerned, this has continued to be a daily staple of handbooks and staff books. But how students act outside the classroom: hallways, lunch, etc. has been void of any life skills creation. Life skills class used to be a common topic that students would have as they went through middle school, junior high and early high school. But this has been lost and eliminated with No Child Left Behind and the push toward core subjects. As a result, faculty, staff and administrators have to fend for themselves or leave it to the parents to help them on these important, critical topics. Therefore, teaching of emotional intelligence, which is a major part of success in today's world, is now left to one major arena for students. It is taught on the sports field, and that is about the only place that you can find faculty (sometimes teachers, sometimes contract employees) actually attempting to deal with this important topic. The schools have deserted this topic and left it to parents, who often do not have the time or skills to help students with this challenging skill set. If we think about employment or evaluations, the major thing it emphasizes is one's emotional intelligence: how we relate to other adults. This is true for almost every profession and occupation. Yet, in the education field it has been pushed aside for the focus on accountability and test scores. Clearly, education needs to get back to this important topic and giving teachers direction, boundaries, guidance and in-services that help them deal with this important aspect of social networking and regulating boundary issues with students.

Conclusion and Technology Integration

Each teacher in today's K-12 schools is faced with coping with technology and boundary issues with a lack of guidance and administrative intervention. Administrators and teachers have ethical obligations to address this difficult and often confusing topic. For the most part, staff handbooks and student handbooks are void of critical information on this subject. Similar to a new frontier, teachers are left to fend for themselves and set their own personal policy. It would enrich the school district, provide structure and reduce liability claims against the school district if training, regulation and written policy addressed this critical topic. Each school district should have its own unique policy on how to regulate acceptable technology use and teacher behavior with a positive and proactive approach.

Websites:

CBS Corporation (2011), CW Website, New York, NY. CBS Corporation

Abercrombie & Fitch (2011) Company Website, New Albany, NY, Abercrombie Fulfillment Co.