

UPPAC NEWS

A BI-ANNUAL NEWSLETTER FROM THE UTAH PROFESSIONAL
PRACTICES ADVISORY COMMISSION

MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES IN A DIGITAL WORLD

Maintaining appropriate boundaries between educators and students has always been tricky. Sometimes it's difficult for educators to know when they have crossed the line from "friendly" to "friend." The prevalence of electronic communication can make this tightrope even more difficult to traverse, since it's easier to forget about appropriate boundaries when communicating electronically. At the same time, because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many educators find themselves communicating electronically with students more often, if not exclusively. With the stars thus aligned, we, your friendly UPPAC staff, would like to take the opportunity to remind educators of the importance of maintaining appropriate boundaries with students, even—perhaps especially—when communicating electronically.

UPPAC has seen a growing concern with cases of boundary violations that have a digital component to them. In fact, the Utah State Board of Education recently updated its definition of "boundary violation," to include "exchanging personal email or phone numbers with a student for a non-educational purpose or use;" and "interacting privately with a student through social media, computer, or handheld devices." Utah Admin. Rule R277-10-2(5)(b).

Educators should remember that the fundamental student-teacher relationship does not change simply because you're communicating electronically. You still need to watch your language, discuss only appropriate topics, and otherwise communicate professionally. A good rule of thumb, whether you're speaking to a student in-person or electronically, is to only say things to your students that you would say in front of their parents.

We encourage educators to avoid one-on-one electronic communication whenever possible. When we communicate electronically, we can't hear a person's tone or see a person's facial expressions. It's much harder to detect sarcasm. It's generally harder to discern a person's meaning. As a result, electronic communication, more than in-person communication, is susceptible to misunderstandings. Including at least one other person in your communications with students, whether it's a parent, an administrator, or other students, makes it far less likely that you will be misunderstood and run into problems. It also makes it less likely that a student will say something that might chip away at the boundaries that keep everyone safe.

One benefit of electronic communication is that it allows us to read over what we just typed before clicking "send." We encourage educators to take advantage of this to make sure that your messages

come across the way you intend. If you find that your message is unclear or could be interpreted in different ways, consider different wording to make sure your meaning is clear. And because humor sometimes doesn't come across the way we intend, we recommend saving your brilliant sense of humor for the classroom, rather than attempting to make your students laugh through electronic communication.

It has been a challenging year, and we have been amazed by the hard work and adaptability of Utah's educators. We encourage you to remember your role as educators and be careful to avoid violating boundaries with your students, so you can continue to be a positive influence in their lives. Thank you for all you do.

UPPAC EDUCATOR DISCIPLINE

A Summary of Utah State Board of Education Licensing Actions from August to December 2020

Suspension

UPPAC Case No. 19-1614

An educator came to school smelling of alcohol, and she agreed to take an alcohol test. She took two tests, which showed BAC results of .069 and .075. She admitted she drank alcohol the previous night. The educator's license was suspended for no less than one year.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1618

An educator came to school smelling of alcohol and acting strangely. She denied she had been drinking, but she could give no explanation for her odd behavior and odor of alcohol. She refused to take an alcohol test. It was later discovered that the educator had failed to disclose two previous DUI charges to her district. The educator's license was suspended for no less than three years.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1648

An educator engaged in a physical altercation with an eighth-grade student in a physical education class. The student was being disrespectful and refused to put a basketball away at the end of class. The educator took the ball away, and the student

tried to get another one. The educator pushed the student into the wall, then grabbed the student and slammed him into a brick wall. He then threw the student violently to the floor and put his knee on the student to hold him down. The student had redness and bruising on his chest, back, and arm. The educator was convicted of Child Abuse, a second-degree felony, which will be reduced to a class A misdemeanor upon successful completion of probation. The educator's license was suspended for no less than ten years.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1658

An educator made inappropriate comments to several female co-workers in person and in text messages. The comments included compliments and suggestive statements such as "you look good coming and going," and telling a woman who had recently had a mammogram that he could help because he was trained in massage. The educator's license was suspended for no less than six months.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1680

An educator had inappropriate classroom discussions with a vulnerable population of high-

school students. Discussions included discussing the history of the “f” word, using the “n” word in discussions of racism, and discussing sexual issues in a discussion about gender identity. The educator’s license was suspended for no less than one year.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1683

A school administrator engaged in a pattern of sexual harassment toward one employee he supervised, as well as many instances of inappropriate behavior toward other employees he supervised. The behavior included inappropriate comments about the employees’ attire and physical appearance, as well as sexual innuendos. The administrator frequently acknowledged the inappropriateness of his behavior by referencing the #metoo movement and continuing to engage in the inappropriate conduct. The administrator’s license was suspended for no less than one year.

Reprimand

UPPAC Case No. 19-1667

An educator had students take a state-level skills assessment for other students. This occurred about five times over two school years. The educator received a reprimand.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1670

An educator grabbed a student and pulled him out of his chair. The educator previously received a letter of warning from UPPAC for another physical incident with a student. The educator received a reprimand.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1674

An educator copied a student’s essay assignment and uploaded it onto a different student’s online

profile, in order to help that student graduate on time. Neither student was aware of the situation. The educator received a reprimand.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1691

An educator entered incorrect data, and directed an instructional coach to enter incorrect data, into the state’s online system for reporting standardized test scores. The educator received a reprimand.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1723

An educator learned from a student that the student’s girlfriend might be pregnant. The educator gave the student her credit card to purchase a pregnancy test. The student asked the educator about the morning after pill, and the educator told him to talk to the pharmacist. The student purchased a morning after pill with the educator’s credit card. The educator received a reprimand.

UPPAC Case No. 20-1735

An educator was very close with several students at her school who were in the same family. The educator allowed the students in her home and gave one student rides to sports activities, even after repeated warnings. The educator received a reprimand.

UPPAC Case No. 20-1765

An educator was arrested for DUI and later convicted of Impaired Driving. He previously received a letter of warning from UPPAC after a domestic violence incident with his wife. The educator received a reprimand.

Letter of Warning

UPPAC Case No. 19-1656

An educator received several complaints from students about his mocking and demeaning comments. The educator said he did not mean any offense and just had a sarcastic sense of humor, but several students said it created a toxic and offensive classroom atmosphere. The educator received a letter of warning.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1659

During orchestra class, an educator repeatedly asked a student to face forward and pay attention, but the student continued to misbehave. The educator lost her patience and whacked the student on his back with her violin bow. The educator received a letter of warning.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1662

An educator approached a misbehaving first-grade student, who flopped to the ground and refused to get up. The educator grabbed the student by the belt loop, pulled him up, and led him to his class. The student continued to pull away, and the educator continued to direct him to his class by holding his belt loop. The student later said it hurt. The educator received a letter of warning.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1665

An educator distributed to a student a printed copy of a PowerPoint presentation that was very similar to the upcoming end-of-level math assessment. She later used the same presentation as a review with the whole class. The educator admitted her actions were careless, but she denied intentionally showing assessment questions to her students before the test. The educator received a letter of warning.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1673

An educator helped students during RISE testing by helping them figure out the steps needed to solve a math problem, providing definitions, and giving other help short of providing answers. The educator received a letter of warning.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1675

During an assembly, an educator told a seventh-grade student to put his phone away several times, and the student refused. The educator finally attempted to physically take the phone from the student, who reacted by putting the phone into his jacket pocket with the educator's hand still holding on. As the educator removed his hand from the student's pocket, the jacket ripped under the arm and down the sleeve. The educator received a letter of warning.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1689

On two occasions, an educator used vulgar, inappropriate language while addressing misbehaving students. The educator received a letter of warning.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1697

An educator hit a student and pulled him by the jacket around his neck. On another occasion, the educator grabbed a student by the arm. The educator received a letter of warning.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1699

An educator grabbed a misbehaving student by the wrist, pulled him to a different area, and restrained him while he tried to get away. Witnesses reported that the educator was aggressively shaking the student, but the educator indicates she just prevented the student from getting away while he

was thrashing around. The educator received a letter of warning.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1700

An educator physically dragged a 4th-grade student by her arms to another classroom when she refused to get up from the hallway floor. The educator received a letter of warning.

UPPAC Case No. 19-1703

An educator pulled a chair out from under a student who was sleeping in class, causing the student to hit his head on the table and slide under the desk. The educator received a letter of warning.

QUESTIONS? PLEASE CONTACT US

Our UPPAC team is available if you need to report an ethical violation, have questions about the ethics of a situation, or if you would like us to provide training to your LEA regarding the educator standards. Please email UPPAC at uppac@schools.utah.gov or call (801) 538-7835.

Special thanks to Steve Oler, who recently left UPPAC after nearly five years as one of our staff investigators. Best of luck in your new pursuits!