

# **Having Challenging Conversations With Faculty About Behavioral Issues With Students**

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The best time to have conversations with faculty members about concerning behavior toward students is before their behavior violates a school rule, or, even worse, violates a law. At this early stage, the adverse impact on the student is less, the potential employment consequences are fewer and the opportunity for a satisfactory outcome for all parties is far greater. Despite these significant benefits, there are substantial challenges to having successful conversations at this early stage. Schools that prepare for these challenges in advance will be more likely to have successful outcomes.

A crucial foundation for addressing behavioral issues between faculty and students is having a clear set of behavioral standards. These standards must not just exist on paper; they must be accepted practice within the school community. Socializing the behavioral standards will require thoughtful creation and implementation. Having a set of behavior standards provides clear reference points and a common vocabulary crucial to having successful conversations.

Even when behavioral standards are in place and accepted by the community, conversations about deviations from the standards will be difficult unless the school has a culture of accountability. Too often, schools do not have systems for conducting behavioral evaluations or experience providing meaningful feedback. As a result, on the rare occasions that faculty members do receive feedback, they may perceive it as an attack rather than an opportunity for professional growth. Further, too few supervisors have training or experience in giving critical feedback. To complicate matters, providing critical feedback is difficult in a tight-knit environment in which co-workers are seen as part of a school “family”.

Communicating feedback in a manner that is likely to be constructively received takes training and preparation. Scenario- based training can be particularly helpful for preparing supervisors for giving feedback in challenging situations. Supervisors should be familiar with the basics of healthy boundaries, including the distinction between boundary crossings and boundary violations. Boundaries describe the limits of a relationship. It is always the responsibility of the faculty and staff, the adults in the school, to set the boundaries with the students, the children in the school. Setting and maintaining boundaries which are appropriate for the circumstances will be difficult for many to do if their schools have not expressly described clear expectations and provided avenues for guidance and support. Faculty and staff training should address how to demonstrate affection and support to students within acceptable boundaries.

Additionally, training should include the basics of child development. Emphasis should be placed on the concept of acting in service of the healthy development of the student and avoiding, even unintentionally, the development of dependent relationships. While many well-intended and educated school faculty have robust training in their content areas and bring valuable pedagogical expertise to the school, most do not arrive with a clear understanding of the dynamics of the inherent power imbalance between students and teachers. Nor do they understand the vulnerability this creates, not just for students, but also for teachers. Most teachers are not trained to be consistently alert to the fact that the relationship between teacher (coach, advisor, etc.) and student is not equal and there are a subtle ways teachers may inadvertently mishandle the power dynamics, potentially compromising the experience of students and placing their professional lives and the school in jeopardy. Without clear guidance and training, many well intended school employees will struggle to recognize when a behavior or relationship with a student becomes questionable or worrisome. Confusion in these areas is informed by many variables, and although this article will not address the psychology behind power dependent relationships and the forces at work when adults use students to meet their own needs, all schools can, and should, incorporate some basic guidance to their teachers.

Most often, early and mild boundary violations are not explicit breaches of professional conduct. They are subtle, such as: showing preferential treatment for a student; texting late in to the night with a student; having overly familiar conversations with a student; sharing more than is appropriate about one's own life; becoming a confidant for a student around the student's dating or sexual behavior; sharing information with a student in a way that makes the student feel like the teacher is a peer; and blurring of professional and private lives through communications via social media. Typically, such boundary issues surface when a colleague expresses concern about another teacher's behavior to an administrator. Is your dean or department chair well prepared to have a conversation with a teacher about whom concerns have been raised?

Most faculty rise to their administrative roles owing to their years in the classroom and pedagogical expertise. Few will have received significant management training, much less specific training on having difficult conversations. Without training, many well intended faculty leaders stumble when providing important feedback about behavior. Guided by their own discomfort and role confusion (particularly if they are new to supervising prior colleagues) they may minimize problematic behavior, reassure too much, and explain or rationalize their colleague's behavior. Consequently, their interaction will not invite the colleague to understand missteps, leaving students, the colleague, and the institution even more vulnerable. In many cases, administrators will avoid having the conversations altogether. Without practice and support, during a moment of awkward supervision, administrators may get defensive or emotional, letting frustration, fear or embarrassment drive the conversation, particularly if the respondent becomes upset. They may also rush through the moment, to get it over with, without stopping to do the important work of listening.

Even trained and experienced supervisors should prepare in advance of having challenging conversations. An indirect approach by the faculty leader may spare that leader some discomfort in that moment, but it will not result in a clear communication about what should not happen again and how the school will provide support to help the responding faculty member avoid another boundary issue. Identify individuals in your school who have the capacity to have these types of conversations and enlist their help to role play and practice in advance of the conversation regarding potential boundary violations. The administrator charged with having these challenging conversations should be prepared to name the problems and describe the observed behavior to move the discussion forward. The administrator should strive to make the conversation professional, not personal. Language in the conversation should be clear and direct. The administrator should be prepared to state the consequences, or impact, of the behaviors. It is important for the employee to understand that this feedback is being provided to assure that the consequences do not occur again. If the responding colleague recognizes the behavior, the supervisor should be prepared to explain why the behavior is unwanted in the school setting. Having behavioral standards to refer to in this moment is critical.

Whether the responding colleague recognizes the behavior or not, accepts or denies responsibility, the administrator needs to know how to close the meeting with a clear, unconditional commitment on the part of the responding colleague to not engage in the identified behavior again, and to seek guidance from the faculty leader if there is ever a question about how to behave with a student in the future. The administrator should work with the employee to create a plan to address the identified issues. In these circumstances, to encourage employees to adopt the plan as their own, it is beneficial to ask them to summarize the plan that has been discussed and then to write it up. This conversation is just the first step to changing problematic behaviors. Be sure to provide the support needed for the plan to succeed and to follow up.

Being prepared for having challenging conversations with faculty about behavioral issues with students will help many faculty members develop professionally and avoid pitfalls that could harm students and damage their careers. It is never easy to start a conversation with a teacher about a potential boundary crossing. It is harder still in a setting that has not routinized observation and coaching as part of a school's culture. But keeping sight of the primary goal of creating and maintaining safe, nourishing culture for healthy childhood development in our schools can help even the most avoidant and uncomfortable faculty leader start the conversation.