

## 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.