

Positive boundaries

Touch is one of the most basic human needs, but if you deliberately come into physical contact with your students—even in the most innocent of contexts—you put yourself, and your career, at risk.

It's sad, but true. Every year, two dozen or more Minnesota teachers on average are accused of inappropriate touch. Even when the charges are proven false, the impact on you personally, your career and your colleagues can be devastating.

Be aware of, and sensitive to, physical and emotional boundaries. Remember, you are not your students' friend—you are their teacher. Let professional counselors and psychologists assist them with emotional issues.

Here are some other ways to reduce the risk of being accused:

- Avoid physical horseplay with students. Don't let students sit on your lap, don't play wrestle with students.
- Do not meet with students alone in a closed setting. Music teachers and coaches, along with counselors, are especially vulnerable. If you're giving an instrumental lesson, make sure you are within sight of the window. If your door does not have a window, leave the door open. This is true with any type of conference – if you are meeting with a student, make sure you are in an open area or at least have the door open.
- Be especially careful, especially if you teach fifth grade or above. Regardless of gender, avoid touching any student unless absolutely necessary.
- Avoid personal notes to students unless they deal solely with educational matters. Be especially careful with email, social media and text messages. Avoid using messaging programs like Snapchat and instant messaging platforms. Be sure to keep a record of your communications with a student.
- Use extreme caution when meeting or communicating with students in nonschool settings, especially when other adults are not present. You should always have parent and district approval.
- Never use physical force to punish a student. Although in some circumstances you may use reasonable force to restrain a student to ensure the safety of that student or the people around him or her, use extreme caution in doing so.

