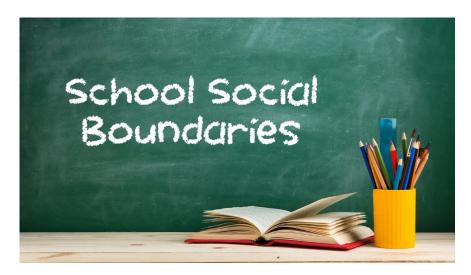# "Keeping Boundaries"

School Boundaries Orientation Video Outline
by Justin Beaton

Background: When I was going through staff orientation for RUSD, there were plenty of antiquated videos on HAZMAT training, but nothing on the importance of social boundaries. This was an idea I came up with to try and counteract this deficiency in the school staff orientation process. Most of the professionals I've spoken to about this idea have said that they feel that it's a very promising idea. I wanted to utilize my whole experience for something positive, and I've already pitched it to a few school districts.

Social boundaries seem like common sense, and they really should be, but when you're in it and are building relationships with male and female staff and students, especially when you're a younger staff who is more extroverted like I was, it becomes a whole different ballgame. I, and other students and staff, were aware of other staff/student situations when I was at the schools, and you see new cases in the news all the time. It's more of an issue than school districts realize, and simply because they aren't immediately aware of it 1) that doesn't mean it isn't happening, especially at the high school level, and 2) that doesn't mean action shouldn't be taken to seek to actively prevent it.

I believe that my orientation video would help to accomplish prevention, primarily because the principles are practical and actionable. They say, "If you want to know where a road leads, ask somebody who's on the way back," so I thought it was a good idea to apply that principle toward attempting to implement something positive in this area.

Objective: To protect staff and students, even if that means staff sometimes have to protect students from themselves.

Background: A school staff member is much more than simply a school staff member. Younger students might look to you as a role model, especially if their home situations aren't the best, and older students might look to you as somebody to confide in or even as a prospect, so the need for adequate boundaries is imperative. You can certainly have relationships with students, but only within the parameters of properly maintained boundaries. You can care about, be an example to, and be friendly with students without breaching boundaries.

1) **Always Be Conscientious**

- **Maintain blameless optics.** Never be alone with a student (and this should probably be a school policy) without other students and/or preferably staff members present—and that includes rides home if you're a coach.

- **Know the warning signs.** One example of this might be a student confiding in you about personally sensitive topics. If it's the opposite gender, that would be a good opportunity to refer them to a counselor or, perhaps, a teacher of the same gender.

- **Know your age range.** Elementary school kids, for instance, will look to you more as a parent. High schoolers, however, might see you more as a peer, or, even some that already date and seek out older people, might see you as a prospect if you're single. It's important to recognize and understand what you're dealing with and adjust your boundaries accordingly. In this instance, be specifically cognizant that nothing you say could be construed as flirtatious. This is especially imperative for younger staff members who are of the same generation as the students.

- **Don't be a tyrant but be firm.** The "cool teacher" is something that belongs in TV shows only. You do not want things to ever get too comfortable. You are the authority figure, so act like it. Do not entertain anything inappropriate. Shut it down immediately. Communicate that you are a fun teacher, sure, but make it clear that, in the area of boundaries, you are 'no-nonsense' and will <u>not</u> compromise. Set the example…even if others aren't. That last part is especially key because high schools nowadays tend to be comprised of students who are too mature and some teachers

who are too immature.

- **No hugs!** Keep it to high fives, handshakes, or fist bumps. This is especially true at younger school levels.

2) Don't Minimize

- **Don't lie to yourself.** Don't say things like, "We're just friends" or "I don't have bad intentions." You probably don't, but a relationship doesn't have to reach a criminal level and there can still be an inappropriate breach of boundaries.

- **Self-Reflect Often.** "Are there any aspects of my interpersonal conduct that could be misconstrued or taken out of context?" "Do any of my colleagues need accountability?" See something, say something.

- **Avoid the "slippery slope."** Remember that the "slippery slope" always begins with a seemingly innocent first step. Be the one who refuses to even entertain taking that first step (i.e., avoid even the *appearance* of a grey area—always be where you're supposed to be, do what you're supposed to be doing, be talking to who you're supposed to be, and act how you're supposed to be acting, regardless of who's watching).

3) Seek Trusted Accountability

- **Set up "Accountability Colleagues."** Choose fellow staff members that you trust that you all can check in with each other regularly. Pick people whom you can rely on and be transparent with.

- **Have proper boundaries in all areas/scenarios.** Make a concerted effort to disallow inappropriate talk/gossip even amongst colleagues (i.e., discussing or gossiping about students inappropriately)

- **Be vigilant for all warnings of any potential forms of boundary breaching risks.** At the high school and even middle school level, for instance, it would be

naive to think that attraction doesn't occur with younger staff members, so be sure to confide in your accountability partners at the first sign of anything inappropriate (Example: I subbed at a middle school once and had an 8th-grade girl subtly and seriously proposition me about being my girlfriend. I obviously rebuffed her, but if I had proper accountability partners in place, I could have gone to them immediately).

- **Don't laugh off any behavior.** If a student makes a sexual comment to you, for instance, don't just shake your head or roll your eyes. You need to address it immediately. Or, if a student begins talking to you about issues they're having with their boyfriend or girlfriend, for instance, that may seem innocuous, but that is too personal of a topic, and you need to get out of that conversation immediately before it even gets going. Again, refer them to a teacher or counselor of the same gender.

4) NO Extra-Curricular Contact – THE MOST IMPORTANT!

- **The most important factor!** This is the <u>biggest</u> factor of them all. I can tell you that 10 times out of 10 when there's an inappropriate staff/student situation, some form of extracurricular contact has taken place. I personally witnessed countless students and teachers adding one other on social media or exchanging numbers and, as a first-time sub, thought nothing of it. DO NOT engage in this behavior. You are not their "Facebook friend." You are school staff. Do not give out your number, and do not accept any social media friend requests from students. Period. This alone would prevent most of these issues from happening. Once they've graduated, fine, but most certainly NOT while they are still a student.

- **Get rid of school email systems, or highly regulate them.** In recent years, there has been a development of schools having school email systems. I am NOT a fan of this, but if you're going to have one, the school administration needs to set up trigger words that will immediately notify the school administration to be able to view the email correspondence. This is not to be suspicious of staff or invade privacy, but it is to keep email communications accountable. Despite being "school-

approved," school email systems between staff and students are still a huge danger and I would *highly* advise against having them, if possible.

- **Even innocuous conversation becomes inappropriate when conducted outside of school.** For instance, talking about appropriate, personal topics while in school and while other students or staff are present is fine. But take that same innocuous conversation and put it in the context of a staff member and student talking about it outside of school and it now becomes inappropriate because it's private and extracurricular, even though it's not necessarily criminal. That's the <u>extreme</u> importance of disallowing/preventing communications outside of school.

- **Implement a policy where staff/students can be disciplined as well.** I would even take it one step further and encourage schools to implement policies where both staff *and* students can be disciplined for attempting to add one another on social media, exchange numbers, or talk outside of school. It would obviously not be a criminal sanction for students as it might be for a staff member, but this sort of thing does happen both ways and, at present, students know that they are immune to getting in trouble in any capacity for this type of behavior.

  If a policy like this existed, this would almost entirely end inappropriate staff/student situations because staff and students would now both have something to lose by attempting to initiate interactions with each other, especially if discipline could include employment termination for the staff or suspension for the student. At present, the only "policy" that exists is if something rises to the level of criminality, then the staff member gets prosecuted. There need to be rules implemented for both sides *long* before something rises to that level. And the purpose of this would not be to vilify or point fingers, but it would help to serve the *ultimate* purpose of eliminating inappropriate staff/student relationships once and for all, which is the goal.

5) **Administration <u>Has</u> to Set the Tone**

- **Encourage implementing rational boundary awareness.** Currently, if a staff

member were to approach a member of administration and confide in them about a relationship with a student that is inappropriate but maybe hasn't yet risen to the level of criminality, the administration would still be somewhat likely to overreact and treat the staff member as though they are a "predator." The problem with this is this sort of reaction further creates an environment where inappropriate staff/student relationships occur.

Let's say a staff member has secretly been communicating with a student. And let's say they know it's wrong but have developed an actual friendship with the student. And let's also say that it hasn't yet risen to the level of criminality despite it still being obviously inappropriate. If a staff member knows that administration is going to react irrationally and heavy-handedly, he or she will be *far less* likely to approach them for help, meaning the relationship will continue, in secret, to its ultimate progression of criminal inappropriateness. If we are serious about ending this sort of behavior, we *must* lay rational groundwork where people feel safe and comfortable to come forward if something is going on. The more schools continue to pretend that this sort of thing doesn't happen and then react irrationally when it does, the more it will, unfortunately, continue to happen in secret.

- **Develop a Staff Accountability program and encourage teachers to take advantage of it.** If teachers aren't going to choose, of their own volition, to take on accountability partners, it may be incumbent on the administration to implement a program themselves. This goes together with the last bullet point because if a staff member does come to administration to ask for help about a situation where boundaries are being breached, the administration could assign them to new or more accountability partners, and they could change around either their or the student's schedule, or they could personally check in with that staff member every day or require a report from them.

None of these actions, in my estimation, are too arduous or time-consuming to implement because the alternative is an incident happens and the school is now all over the news. So, what I'm trying to say is the court of public opinion is not going

to be kind, so it's best to be preventative about this issue rather than reactionary, regardless of how "politically incorrect" it is for a school to acknowledge it as being an issue. It needs to be dealt with properly *before* it happens.

- **Include real-life seminars and training.** This sort of training should not be a one-and-done kind of thing. It should be administered every so often, and it should be for new *and* current staff. The training needs to address real-life scenarios, not fluff, sugar-coated scenarios. Schools nowadays aren't "Little House on the Prairie" innocent establishments of learning, so the training needs to reflect the realities that staff members may/will face. Being honest about the potential dangers that exist will only serve to effectively protect not just the students, but the staff members as well.

6) Conclusion

These principles are always relevant and always pertinent. It's not a "fix it and forget it" sort of approach. Staff will constantly need refresher training—perhaps yearly. The final exhortation I would leave with staff who watch my orientation video would be that "Character is not what you do when somebody is watching, but what you do when no one is watching!"