



Connecticut's Teacher Education and Mentoring Program

**Supplemental Scenarios**  
**Ethical and Professional Dilemmas**

**Facilitator's Guide**  
**Module 5**

Understanding the Code of Professional  
Responsibility for Educators



*Revised January 2015*

# *INTRODUCTION*

*The education profession is vested by the public with a trust and responsibility requiring the highest ideals of professionalism. Therefore, the educator accepts both the public trust and the responsibilities to practice the profession according to the highest possible degree of ethical conduct and standards. Such responsibilities include commitment to the students, the profession, the community and the family.*

*Code of Professional Responsibility for Educators 2010 Preamble- Connecticut State Department of Education*

Public school educators are held to high standards of behavior because they are entrusted with the well-being of their students. The public expects that their behavior exemplifies ethical and moral integrity. Teachers serve as role models who should recognize that their conduct, both on and off the job, can profoundly impact their professional image. Lapses in judgment can adversely impact students, damage teachers' credibility and erode public trust in schools and the profession. Additionally, with advances in technology and greater access to social media, the challenges educators are likely to encounter have increased in recent years. Consequently, educators must develop a keen awareness and sensitivity to a variety of dilemmas and circumstances they may encounter in their daily contact with students, families and the community. It is vital that educators make conscious ethical decisions to ensure that their professional practice meets the highest possible ethical standards of conduct and responsibility.

The purpose of this publication is to provide a collection of supplemental scenarios to the original publication in 2012. These scenarios have been added in response to growing interest from TEAM District Facilitators to promote dialogue around more current issues that may need collaborative conversations at the school building level. Although the descriptions provided are fictional, they are based on actual situations and cases that have led to negative consequences ranging from personal and public embarrassment to license revocation, termination, criminal and civil liability.

Please note, this activity has not been designed to unduly raise fears or to prescribe a specific moral/ethical code. It is intended to be a resource for educators to help discuss, recognize and analyze situations that could result in public and professional harm. Like most ethical challenges, some issues may have simple solutions while others will require educators to employ their best professional judgment.

## *Organization and Format*

Educators rarely have the opportunity to openly discuss many of the issues raised in the following scenarios. Consequently, facilitators may observe various levels of discomfort ranging from a heightened concern about having any student interaction that could be misinterpreted to personal disagreements about whether or not the examples provided truly represent ethical dilemmas or questions regarding professionalism.

All reactions are legitimate. It is the fundamental nature of conversations like these to not only produce some discomfort, but also to offer opportunities for discussion, self-reflection and learning. Facilitated conversations are meant to raise teachers' level of awareness about responsible, professional behavior. Bringing beginning teachers, their mentors, as well as other staff members together to share perspectives will enhance the conversations and likely result in richer dialogue. Facilitators should establish an understanding with the group that the purpose of these discussions is to recognize that there are professional boundaries. The discussions are **not** meant to suggest that teachers should refrain from building and maintaining meaningful relationships with their students, colleagues and community to promote school success.

The following supplemental scenarios are provided as a way for educators to carefully examine and discuss possible strategies for dealing with ethical dilemmas. The scenarios are organized in the following categories and can be added to the original handbook:

- Situations Involving Students
- Situations Involving Professional Ethics
- Bullying situations
- Situations Involving Professionalism (NEW)

The scenarios are based on the structure of the *Code of Professional Responsibility for Educators* which should help guide the discussion and analysis of each scenario.

## *Facilitating the Conversations*

Districts have the opportunity to select the facilitator for the discussion of the scenarios. It is recommended that the facilitator be knowledgeable about district policies and procedures as well as the *Code of Professional Responsibility for Educators* within the *Common Core of Teaching*. For example, facilitators could be:

District Facilitators,  
Human Resource Directors,  
Building Administrators,  
Central Office Administrators or  
Teacher Leaders.

## *Sample Process*

1. Prior to conducting the facilitated conversations, instruct participants to review the *Code of Professional Responsibility for Educators*. *Be sure participants have a copy of the Code.*
2. Plan in advance which scenarios you will discuss. **Legislation mandates that at least one of the scenarios include a situation involving bullying (Category IV).** Select at least two to three additional scenarios which are most relevant to your district. **Provide each participant with copies of the selected scenarios and corresponding questions from the Participant’s Workbook. Create a sign-in sheet to keep for your records.**
3. Use the PowerPoint provided to set the purpose for the facilitated conversations. You may want to ask participants to review the PowerPoint prior to the scheduled meeting or use it to frame the conversation at the start of the meeting.
4. Review the first selected scenario using the guiding questions. Instruct participants to respond to the questions in the order listed as the discussion will build from one question to the next. Participants may work in small groups to develop responses and then share several of their responses with the entire group.

*What possible issues/concerns might this scenario raise?*

*How could this situation become a violation of the law, the “Code” or other school/district policies?*

*In this situation, what are some potential negative consequences for the teacher, for students and the school community?*

*What responses/actions will result in a more positive outcome and/or what proactive measures might be considered?*

5. Use the provided section of the *Code of Professional Responsibility for Educators* which relates to the specific scenario to develop a deeper understanding of the educators’ responsibility to students, community and the profession.
6. Close the discussion by summarizing the key points and strategies to effectively handle a similar situation. Use the discussion points provided in the guide to assist you in both small and large group discussions.
7. Repeat the process with the remaining scenarios.
8. **Final Reflection:** on page 28 of the Participant’s Workbook, there are six questions provided that can be used as a final reflection. You may select to have participants respond to one or more of the questions and collect their response as an exit ticket at the end of the session.
9. **Next Steps:** Direct beginning teachers to login to TEAM and complete the online questions. Once they have completed the online questions, they will have completed the Module 5 requirements for this year.

**Please note:** The discussion points provided in the guide are by no means exhaustive and it is not mandatory that all points are discussed. Your participants may raise issues, discuss potential negative consequences and consider alternative actions beyond what is included in the guide.

## ***Situations Involving Students***

### **Scenario: *Providing Personal/Financial Support***

#### ***High School Scenario:***

Ms. J is a veteran teacher who has always shown an interest in her students, not just in their academics, but in knowing them as people beyond the classroom. She is aware of and shows an interest in their families, hobbies, sports activities, ambitions and interests. Kevin is a student in her 12<sup>th</sup> grade social studies class. Ms. J learned that Kevin was interested in attending college, but lacked the necessary financial support from his family. Ms. J felt that through the support of a concerned adult, Kevin could pursue his dream of attending college. She began emailing Kevin with information about the college application and financial aid process. Communications soon became more personal regarding his family life, finances and Kevin's social life. Ms. J offered to pay for Kevin's college applications and as the year progressed helped him to prepare for college by purchasing things that he would need for his dorm room. Ultimately, Ms. J went as far as to help Kevin buy a car and place him on her insurance policy. Although not knowing the extent of her involvement, colleagues began to note her attentiveness to Kevin as inappropriate.

#### ***Elementary School Scenario:***

Mr. T is a third grade teacher in an urban school. Mr. T has noticed that a little girl named, Molly, has come to school in clothes too thin for winter wear and without an appropriate winter jacket. He has been in touch with Molly's mother and knows that the family is struggling financially. While shopping in a local store, he sees children's winter jackets, gloves and hats for sale and decides to buy what he can for Molly. Molly's mother is very thankful for Mr. T's thoughtfulness and donation. This is not the first time Mr. T has done this. There have been other times in the past that he has bought clothing and discreetly donated it for one of his students.

Consider the following sections of the **Code of Professional Responsibility for Teachers: Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies Section 10-145d-400a**

#### ***(b) RESPONSIBILITY TO THE STUDENT:***

##### ***(1) The professional teacher, in full recognition of his or obligation to the student, shall:***

(I) Remain steadfast in guaranteeing equal opportunity for quality education for all children, and not unlawfully discriminate

#### ***c) RESPONSIBILITY TO THE PROFESSION:***

##### ***(1) The professional teacher, in full recognition of his or obligation to the teaching profession, shall:***

(A) Conduct himself or herself as a professional realizing that his or her actions reflect directly upon the status and substance of the profession

#### **UNPROFESSIONAL CONDUCT:**

##### ***(2) The professional teacher, in full recognition of his or her obligation to the profession of teaching, shall not:***

(C) Engage in any misconduct which would impair his or her ability to teach

**Discussion Questions:**

1) *What possible issues/concerns might this scenario raise?*

2) *How could this situation become a violation of the law, the “Code” or other school/district policies?*

3) *In this situation, what are some potential negative consequences for the teacher, for the students and the school community?*

4) *What responses/actions will result in a more positive outcome and/or proactive measures might be considered?*

1) What possible issues/concerns might this scenario raise?

- Although most teachers maintain caring professional relationships with their students, ethical boundaries of the teacher-student relationship have received a lot of negative press in the past decade. Personal/intimate relationships have been brought to national attention and, with that, increased suspicion when it comes to teachers’ relationships with their students. Maintaining a professional relationship where boundaries are clearly established is necessary to protect both parties for the potential abuse of power, control and/or influence.
- In both scenarios, the teachers are likely well intended and deeply concerned about the welfare of their students. Whether providing funding for college applications or purchasing winter clothing, both actions could be perceived as a demonstration of favoritism. This could stir colleagues, parents, and/or students to call into question the teacher’s intentions.

2) *How could this situation become a violation of the law, the “Code” or other school/district policies?*

- The personal nature of emails, phone calls and personal involvement of Ms. J can create an emotionally unsafe learning environment for Kevin, as he is being singled out for attention that other students don’t get. This may make him feel very uncomfortable, yet indebted to the teacher at the same time.
- The school community and the community at-large have an expectation that teachers will behave in a professional manner. Ms. J’s behavior may be perceived as unprofessional, crossing established ethical boundaries. Mr. T’s behavior can also be perceived as “crossing the line” if the same “gifts” are not available for others. Although there is not a definitive source on ethical boundaries regarding teacher-student relationships, teachers should familiarize themselves with the Code of Professional Responsibilities as well as other school and district policies.

3) *In this situation, what are some potential negative consequences for the teacher, for the students and the school community?*

- Although Ms. J was well intended at the beginning, she crossed the line from her role as a teacher to involvement in her student's personal life. This leaves the teacher vulnerable to accusations of misconduct -- some of which may be true and some of which may not. For Mr. T, there could also be accusations of an inappropriate relationship with Molly's mother or with Molly herself. Both teachers' integrity could be questioned and lead to loss of job and/or license to teach.
- The parents may take legal action against Ms. J for interference in their son's life.
- Once financial support and/or gifts are given, the student may feel indebted to the teacher in ways that may make him/her feel uncomfortable.
- The community may lose confidence in their trust of educators in their school system.

4) *What responses/actions will result in a more positive outcome and/or proactive measures might be considered?*

- Teachers should not be afraid to connect with their students; they simply need to find ways that allow them to build caring, trusting relationships while maintaining a professional stance.
- Prior to becoming involved, Ms. J might have contacted the school counselor when she found out that Kevin needed assistance with college applications and financial aid. In this way, Ms. J would have provided the assistance necessary but remain within the role of Kevin's teacher.
- Ms. J may need to examine her own intentions. Is she attempting to fulfill a personal need or void in her own life through this relationship? The teacher must recognize the boundaries in the professional teacher/student relationship.
- Mr. T could start a school based fund to support all students who may be experiencing any type of personal or financial crisis. Additionally, discussing the possibility of an annual clothing drive with the Parent Teacher Organization, whereby all students could both participate and benefit, could be a realistic and appropriate alternative.
- Texts and emails are not private. Personal texts and emails should be stopped immediately.

**Reference:**

Aultman, Lori Price (et.al). Boundary dilemmas in teacher-student relationships: Struggling with "the line." Teacher and Teacher Education. Vol.25 (2009) pp. 636-646.

## ***Situations Involving Professional Ethics***

### ***Scenario: TEAM Program Completion***

Ms. B is a third year teacher who is required to complete the requirements of Connecticut's Teacher Education and Mentoring (TEAM) Program in order to be eligible for continued certification. As part of the program, Ms. B is assigned to a mentor to work with her through the five module professional growth process. However, Ms. B has frequently canceled scheduled time to meet with her mentor and has been inattentive to her expected completion date displayed on her TEAM online dashboard. During her third year of teaching, Ms. B was sent a letter from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) providing notification of her impending deadline and its impact on continued certification. Although this letter was sent months in advance, Ms. B chose to ignore it until a month prior to her final deadline date. At that point, Ms. B created four Professional Growth Action Plans (PGAPs) within several days that were approved by the building principal. Four reflection papers were submitted for review within a three week timeframe.

Consider the following sections of the **Code of Professional Responsibility for Teachers**  
Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies Section 10-145d-400a

#### ***(C) RESPONSIBILITY TO THE PROFESSION:***

***(1) The professional teacher, in full recognition of his or her obligation to the profession of teaching, shall:***

- (A) Conduct himself or herself as a professional realizing that his or her action reflects directly upon the status and substance of the profession.
- (D) Strive to exercise the highest level of professional judgment.
- (E) Assume responsibility for his or her professional development.

#### **UNPROFESSIONAL CONDUCT**

***(2) The professional teacher, in full recognition of his or her obligation to the profession of teaching, shall not:***

- (A) Obtain licensure or employment by misrepresentation or fraud

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1) *What possible issues/concerns might this scenario raise?*
- 2) *How could this situation become a violation of the law, the “Code” or other school/district policies?*
- 3) *In this situation, what are some potential negative consequences for the teacher, for the students and the school community?*
- 4) *What responses/actions will result in a more positive outcome and/or proactive measures might be considered?*

*1) What possible issues/concerns might this scenario raise?*

- Failure to adhere to program requirements and timeframes could result in the loss of the Initial Teaching Certificate with no opportunity for renewal. Without a teaching certificate, a teacher can no longer be employed in a public school. In Connecticut, teachers are eligible for an Initial Teaching Certificate when recommended by an accredited college/university preparation program. Once hired, teachers are required to enroll in the TEAM Program. Teachers are assigned a mentor and most are expected to complete the program in two years with a third year possible for extenuating circumstances. It is the teacher’s responsibility to create a TEAM profile and create an online workspace. It is the district’s responsibility to assign a dedicated mentor and support the teacher through the induction process. Generally, each module takes 8-10 weeks of focused attention, reflection and application in the classroom.
- All teachers are provided with an orientation to the program and should be aware of the requirements and the module process. This teacher has disregarded the process and created reflection papers that do not likely represent collaborative work with a mentor over an extended period of time as defined in the TEAM Program Guidelines.
- The principal signing off on multiple professional growth action plans at one time may indicate a lack of understanding about TEAM Program Guidelines and requirements. Additional support may be necessary from the District Facilitator and/or Regional Education Service Center (RESC) field staff member to clarify misunderstandings and, therefore, prevent additional teachers from thinking that this is acceptable practice.

*2) How could this situation become a violation of the law, the “Code” or other school/district policies?*

- As a teacher, holding a certificate granted by the State Department of Education, Ms. B must comply with legislation adopted to address requirements for those holding the certificate. Teachers who do not successfully complete the TEAM Program within their given timeframe are disregarding their professional responsibility and jeopardize continued employment in the profession.

- Ms. B’s judgment regarding her obligation to TEAM may indicate a pattern of unprofessional and/or negligent behavior. This can impact her overall evaluation within the domain of professional responsibility and teacher leadership.
- Ms. B entered all four module reflection papers for a program that should have been completed over a two-year period using data collected from students in her classroom while engaged in the four step module process. Thus, the reflection papers were not likely an authentic representation of her work with her mentor or her students nor was it reflective of the teacher’s development of new learning over time. This could be interpreted as a misrepresentation of her students, her teaching and her professional development and prohibit an advancement of her certification.

*3) In this situation, what are some potential negative consequences for the teacher, for the students and the school community?*

- Ms. B has not taken advantage of professional learning opportunities that have been offered to her as part of her enrollment in the TEAM Program and may be limiting her own opportunities for enhancing her professional practice.
- Teachers who do not successfully complete all five TEAM modules by the end of three full years in TEAM are neither eligible for renewal of the Initial Educator Certificate, nor eligible to advance to the Provisional Educator Certificate. In such case, in order to earn eligibility for the reissuance of the initial educator certificate, teachers would need to fulfill the requirements of intervening study and experience (CGS, Sec. 10-145f) as approved by the State Board of Education.
- TEAM was developed to provide personalized, guided support to early career teachers to advance professional practice and recognize improved student learning/performance. Choosing not to engage in this opportunity (and requirement) can adversely impact student success, as well as the opportunity for continued employment.

*4) What responses/actions will result in a more positive outcome and/or proactive measures might be considered?*

- All beginning teachers have a TEAM Program Dashboard which assists them in navigating the program requirements in collaboration with their mentor. Clearly displayed for all beginning teachers is the TEAM Program expected completion date. Teachers can “backward plan” from their expected completion date to determine a reasonable timeframe for module completion. Most teachers complete two modules in their first year and two modules in the second year. Module 5 is often offered by the school district facilitator as a group professional dialogue during the school year.
- Districts need to be proactive in monitoring and ensuring that their teachers are engaging in the TEAM Program process. It is necessary that all beginning teachers are oriented to the TEAM Module Process and assigned a mentor to support them through the entirety of the program. The TEAM Program Handbook (available on [www.ctteam.org](http://www.ctteam.org)) is a valuable resource for all TEAM

participants and should be shared and referenced often. Other resources, to include sample reflection papers, are also available for teachers and mentors to explore together.

- District Facilitators have an enhanced dashboard that allows for greater monitoring of individual teacher progress through the module process. Additionally, building principals have the ability to monitor progress via their online dashboard. Monthly/Bi-Monthly meetings led by the District Facilitator or designated facilitator will keep TEAM conversations current and allow for conversations about connecting the work for TEAM to other district initiatives e.g., teacher evaluation, Connecticut Core Standards, curriculum design, Smarter Balanced Assessments etc. Scheduled “check-ins” via email, with reminders about district and state imposed deadlines, would create a record of communication for all parties involved (DF, beginning teacher, mentor, principal).

## ***Situations Involving Bullying***

### ***Scenario: Promoting a Safe, Productive Learning Environment***

By mid-year, Andrew no longer wanted to go to school. He frequently complained to his mother that the teacher was “mean,” but Andrew’s mother thought her son meant that the teacher placed higher expectations on her students than they had been used to in the past. Getting ready for school in the morning, Andrew complained of stomach aches. He didn’t want to go to school. When Andrew’s mother met with his teacher, Ms. H, to discuss her concerns, Ms. H said that Andrew was inattentive and often refused to do the work assigned. She did not address Andrew’s mother’s primary concerns. Andrew began to share more details with his mother about Ms. H. “She picks on me and always seems mad. Yesterday she said to the class, ‘If you want to fail this quiz, just do what Andrew does. Nothing.’ I was so embarrassed! I try to pay attention, but I’d rather put my head down than look at her angry face.” Andrew shared that his teacher would frequently try to get his attention by slamming her hand on his desk, often startling him. Andrew’s mother requested a meeting with the principal immediately. A paraprofessional who works in the classroom has questioned Ms. H about the way she treats Andrew several times without satisfaction. The paraprofessional is going to the principal with her concerns.

Consider the following sections of the **Code of Professional Responsibility for Teachers**  
Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies Section 10-145d-400a

#### ***(b) RESPONSIBILITY TO THE STUDENT:***

##### ***(1) The professional teacher, in full recognition of his or obligation to the student, shall:***

- (A) Recognize, respect and uphold the dignity and worth of students as individual human beings, and, therefore, deal justly and considerately with students.
- (G) Promote the right and freedom of students to learn, explore ideas, develop learning skills and acquire the necessary knowledge to achieve their full potential.

#### ***c) RESPONSIBILITY TO THE PROFESSION:***

##### ***(1) The professional teacher, in full recognition of his or obligation to the profession of teaching, shall:***

- (A) Conduct himself or herself as a professional realizing that his or her actions reflect directly upon the status and substance of the profession
- (D) Strive to exercise the highest level of professional judgment.

#### **UNPROFESSIONAL CONDUCT:**

##### ***(2) The professional teacher, in full recognition of his or her obligation to the student shall not:***

- (C) Emotionally abuse students: or
- (D) Engage in any misconduct which would put students at risk.

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1) *What possible issues/concerns might this scenario raise?*
- 2) *How could this situation become a violation of the law, the “Code” or other school/district policies?*
- 3) *In this situation, what are some potential negative consequences for the teacher, for the students and the school community?*
- 4) *What responses/actions will result in a more positive outcome and/or proactive measures might be considered?*

*(1) What possible issues/concerns might this scenario raise?*

- Teachers can be involved in bullying situations in three ways: as observers, as perpetrators or as victims. This scenario speaks to teacher as perpetrator. When a teacher may be verbally or physically disrespectful and/or abusive, it is often public and blatant, but rarely called bullying. This can reinforce the false notion that only children can be bullies.
- The absence of statistics on adult school “bullies” may be partly because this kind of negative behavior by a teacher, principal, coach or any school personnel is complex to identify, address and rectify. It may be difficult to determine what crosses the line from basic discipline to regularly berating, intimidating, humiliating or physically abusing a student so much that s/he is afraid to be in school.
- The teacher is contributing to the promotion of a negative classroom climate by modeling sarcasm, humiliation and aggressive behavior. If students perceive this to be acceptable by their teacher, they are more likely to behave similarly with peers and other adults.

*2) How could this situation become a violation of the law, the “Code” or other school/district policies?*

- If a bully is identified as the “grown-up in charge,” or the teacher, in this scenario, an investigation by the school district is likely to occur. Most school districts have “Codes of Conduct” in addition the CCT Code of Professional Responsibility featured here. The behavior described in this scenario is clearly in opposition to treating students with respect and dignity.
- In addition to Andrew reporting Ms. H’s behavior to his mother who has already met with the teacher once to share concerns, a paraprofessional in the classroom has questioned Ms. H several times without seeing a change in the way Ms. H seems to target Andrew with sarcasm, belittling remarks and behavior teetering on abusive. Ms. H’s dismissal of concerns expressed by Andrew’s mother and the paraprofessional is escalating this situation and could lead to disciplinary action.

*3) In this situation, what are some potential negative consequences for the teacher, for the students and the school community?*

- If, through an investigative process, Ms. H's actions are determined to be harmful and abusive, Andrew's family could choose to pursue legal action. Whether the investigation is internal and/or external, Ms. H could be suspended, dismissed from employment and/or have charges brought against her.
- Students in this situation are vulnerable and most often, ill-equipped to explain and defend their position. If a student does respond to the teacher's actions and vents his frustrations, this could be perceived as a threat toward the teacher and the student could be suspended. As Andrew's mother is already concerned, this could escalate the situation and create divisiveness within the school community and the community-at-large.

*4) What responses/actions will result in a more positive outcome and/or proactive measures might be considered?*

- Teachers are faced with challenging situations each day and most teachers respond to those challenges in a way that promotes respect and consideration for all students. It is normal for new teachers to experience higher levels of stress during their first years in the classroom. Having a support system in place within the school setting as well as outside of the school setting can help to lessen the burdens teachers may feel.
- Ms. H needs to take Andrew's behavior and the concerns of his mother seriously. During the initial conference, Ms. H may have needed to listen more intently to the concerns Andrew's mother expressed about his disinterest/fear of coming to school each day and brainstorm solutions as to how they could work together to minimize Andrew's anxiety and engage him more actively in the school day. Andrew's physical and emotional response to school is impacting the family and Ms. H is not addressing this immediate need to problem solve. Additionally, Ms. H should be attentive to the paraprofessional's questions about the way she interacts with Andrew. Ms. H may have a specific rationale for some of her interactions with Andrew that would be helpful for the paraprofessional to understand. By dismissing her questions, the paraprofessional now views Ms. H's actions as harmful.
- Ms. H may need to seek professional advice to assist her to more appropriately deal with daily challenges. With additional support, Ms. H can develop a stress reduction plan that identifies strategies for managing the challenges of the work day that do not include disrespectful, inappropriate or abusive behavior toward her students.

**Reference:**

<http://www.apa.org/ed/schools/cpse/teacher-stress-brochure.pdf>

## ***Situations Involving Professionalism***

### ***Scenario: Professional Attire***

#### **High School Scenario:**

Mr. B is an 11<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher who works in a suburban high school. Mr. B is considered to be a valued member of the science department and is well respected by his colleagues and students. Most days Mr. B arrives for work professionally dressed with dress shoes, slacks or khakis, a button-down collared shirt (tucked in) and, on most occasions, a tie. In an effort to raise funds to support extra-curricular clubs, the building principal implemented a Dress Down Friday policy where teachers could elect to pay a nominal fee to wear jeans. Throughout the fall and winter months, teachers abided by the Friday dress down policy, incorporating jeans into their dress down attire. As warmer weather arrived, Mr. B noticed that colleagues were beginning to become more casual in their dress down attire. On one particular warm spring day, Mr. B arrived to work on Dress Down Friday wearing cargo shorts, flip-flops and a graphic t-shirt which exposed several tattoos, including one with explicit language. When addressed by his administrator, Mr. B responded that he felt his attire was no less casual than his other colleagues.

#### **Middle School Scenario:**

Ms. S recently graduated from college and began her first teaching job working in a small district. A young 8<sup>th</sup> Grade teacher, Ms. S strived to exemplify a dedicated professional. She arrived early to prepare her classroom, typically stayed beyond the school day and volunteered to supervise a variety of afterschool and community outreach activities. As colleagues interacted with Ms. S and watched her engage with her students, she quickly built a reputation as a dedicated and competent professional. Though Ms. S was cognizant of appropriate professional attire, she closely followed contemporary fashion trends. Ms. S would often wear V-neck tops complimented with a cardigan sweater, though often times she would remove the cardigan while working with her students. As the fall season approached Ms. S began wearing leggings. On several occasions grade-level team members commented to Ms. S that her attire was sometimes revealing “too much on the top” or “too much on the bottom.” Ms. S simply responded to her team members that her outfit was fashionable and fit within the guidelines of the districts’ dress code policy.

Consider the following sections of the *Code of Professional Responsibility for Teachers*: Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies Section 10-145d-400a

#### **(C) RESPONSIBILITY TO THE PROFESSION**

**(1) *The professional teacher, in full recognition of his or her obligation to the profession of teaching, shall:***

(A) Conduct himself or herself as a professional realizing that his or her actions reflects directly upon the status and substance of the profession;

(D) Strive to exercise the highest level of professional judgment;

**(2) *The professional teacher, in full recognition of his or her obligation to the profession of teaching, shall not:***

(C) Engage in any misconduct which would impair his or her ability to teach

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1) *What possible issues/concerns might this scenario raise?*
- 2) *How could this situation become a violation of the law, the “Code” or other school/district policies?*
- 3) *In this situation, what are some potential negative consequences for the teacher, for the students and the school community?*
- 4) *What responses/actions will result in a more positive outcome and/or proactive measures might be considered?*

1) *What possible issues/concerns might this scenario raise?*

- Although in both scenarios the educators appear to be well-respected and competent classroom teachers, their professionalism is brought into question as a result of their attire. Both Mr. B and Ms. S are not outrageously dressed, but they do bring into question what is professional dress attire in education. Teacher’s need to be cognizant of their appearance and how it may reflect on the profession, their district and/or their school. What is professional attire? What does casual professional dress look like? Additionally, if the district has a published dress code for teachers that is being disregarded, both Mr. B and Ms. S may need to re-examine their decisions or face possible consequences.

2) *How could this situation become a violation of the law, the “Code” or other school/district policies?*

- It is important for educators to be aware that “Dress Code Policies” are typically a locally controlled decision, established by Human Resources and the Board of Education. Due to local control, dress code policies fluctuate greatly across the state and it is the responsibility of district leadership and individual educators to make themselves aware of their own policy details.
- Some educators may argue that school dress code policies violate their ability to express themselves freely and, as such, violate their first amendment rights. When teachers have challenged dress code policies through the courts, most often the courts have sided with the district’s ability to create a professional dress code policy provided that it does not create a discriminatory effect. Two cases to reference would be:

*East Hartford Ed. Assoc. v. Bd. of Education*, 562 F.2d 838 (Connecticut 2nd Circuit Court, 1977) and;

*Mt. Healthy City School District Board of Education v. Doyle*, 429 U.S. 274 (United States Supreme Court, 1977)

- When assessing a particular dress code, courts will generally focus on two issues. First, the courts must find that the provisions of the code promote legitimate educational interests. Such educational interests include the need to avoid disruption of the educational process, student safety, or maintenance of the physical plant.

(From: *A Practical Guide to Connecticut School Law*, Thomas B. Mooney)

3) *In this situation, what are some potential negative consequences for the teacher, for the students and the school community?*

- Although Mr. B is clearly an established educator in his building, he must consider what image his attire sends towards the administration, his colleagues and his students. Often times, teachers use their attire to help maintain clear professional boundaries with students, something a graphic t-shirt may diminish.
- What is the nature of Mr. B's tattoos? Is it acceptable to reveal a tattoo with explicit language? Do they create an unwarranted and/or distracting discussion among the students? Could they be perceived as unprofessional by students, staff and/or community members within the building?
- While Ms. S' clothing options may be fashionable, they may be inappropriate for working with adolescents and young teens. If the clothing is of a revealing nature, it could potentially make her students feel uncomfortable and/or bring her professional judgment into question.

4) *What responses/actions will result in a more positive outcome and/or proactive measures might be considered?*

- District leadership and educators should have regular and open conversations regarding the expectations of professional attire and how it relates to their district's dress code policy.
- Teachers, new and veteran should take the time to familiarize themselves with the CT Code of Professional Responsibility for Educators and their district's and/or building's dress code policies.
- Both Mr. B and Ms. S may need to examine how others view their attire. While he/she may feel it is professionally appropriate, both must take the time to reflect whether or not their attire presents the professional image they have worked hard to establish.

**References:**

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