

Education Matters

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Whatever it takes? (Maybe not)

4 Reasons teachers shouldn't do too much for their students

By Diana Senechal



Last November, a principal in Chester, New York, walked into the home of two students who had not shown up for school. He was accompanied by a school psychologist. The two boys, who live with their mother, were alone at home. The father filed a criminal complaint against him. Later in the month, the school board voted to suspend him with pay.

Responding to the incident, education consultant Robert Pondiscio observes astutely:

“In Steve Farr’s *Teaching as Leadership*, he cites with approval the example of teachers who, rather than get frustrated at their inability to reach the parents of students who are having difficulty in school, walk those students home and wait as long as it takes for mom and dad to come home from work. From one perspective this kind of unannounced ‘home visit’ is an example of the ‘whatever it takes’ school of ‘no excuses’ teaching. From another, it’s trespassing.”

I would take Robert’s point one step further. When a teacher (or principal) crosses over into the role of social worker, babysitter, or anything outside of teaching, he or she runs the risk of

emotional trespass. Both teacher and student may become confused over their roles. Students may come to expect something unrealistic of the teacher, or vice versa. It is normal for a teacher to comfort or advise a student; this need not lead to any misunderstandings or problems. But entering the students’ personal lives is treacherous, and teachers should guard against it unless there is an established protocol.

Confusion of roles

There are several reasons for caution. First, when a teacher steps out of role, one never knows how a student perceives this. In the student’s eyes, the teacher may now be a friend or a family member. If the teacher has to let the student down, it can be devastating for both. If the gesture is unwanted, there may be trouble.

When I was in school, I had a teacher who became chummy with her students, giving them gifts and talking to them about their lives and hers. At one point she realized she had gone too far, and she pulled away. This was hard on the students who had come to depend on her.

Another teacher kept trying to get me to talk to her about my feelings. I resented this, as I preferred to choose whether to confide in someone. Whether welcome or unwelcome, a teacher's intrusion in a student's life can have serious consequences.

Too many plates to spin

Second, a teacher whose responsibilities extend in all directions may not have much time to do anything well. Teachers who make home visits may not know when to stop. The seemingly urgent matters may take priority over the quieter planning.

Genuine emergencies call for intervention, but it is not good, overall, for a teacher to be rushing to the rescue all the time, or even much of the time. Students may gather that the more crises they bring, the more attention they will get. They can manipulate, without meaning to do so, even with the best of intentions, as can the teacher.

Students need to see limits

Third, students actually need the teacher to set limits. They need to learn that a teacher can be formal and still care about them. Many live in environments where people demonstrate loyalty and affection through excess and grandiosity: lavish spending, reckless relationships, even fights. Students learn from their surroundings and popular culture that if you "really care" about someone, you will "go all out" for him or her.

A steady, caring, restrained teacher (who doesn't go overboard and doesn't pull away) can do them immense and lasting good. The teacher who can hold back a little is likely to stay in the profession longer. This does not mean working less; it means allowing oneself not to be a savior but give students something valuable nonetheless. That takes a certain kind of humility, which is not lost on the students.

Inspiring students with education

Fourth, teachers are the ones who can point students to something outside of themselves—be it music, literature, mathematics, history, or another subject. These subjects can ultimately help students make sense of their lives. To erode this even slightly, to sacrifice it for the immediate needs of the students, may be to deprive them of the things that can help them over the years.

I think of how much I was helped by French, Latin, Greek, literature, math, music, and other subjects. Yes, teachers listened to me when I was going through difficult times, and I am deeply grateful to them for that. However, I am also grateful to the ones who kept pointing me to something beyond me. I have forgotten much of the advice teachers gave me, but I remember the poems, essays, novels, and other works they brought to my attention.

There are no absolute rules, of course; much of this depends on the school's policies and culture. Some schools may have clear procedures for home visits, homework help, and so forth. In such cases, the roles are clearly understood and protected, or at least they should be. Even so, if a school expects teachers and principals to undertake such work, it should be mindful of the dangers and complications. Schools should recognize the pitfalls of doing "whatever it takes"—which may not be the most responsible, the most instructive, or even the most caring action. ■



Diana Senechal, a former New York City public school teacher, is writing a book on the loss of solitude in schools and culture.



Educators: Know Your Role

It will do all teachers well to remember that it is acceptable to admit our limits as educators. Yes, we must be caring professionals but caring doesn't necessarily mean involving ourselves in every aspect of students' lives. It might be hard to step back and not involve ourselves, but our efforts are limited to what is appropriate for a professional. The tricky part? Gauging professional propriety—it is not cut-and-dried.

Quite a number of difficulties can arise from becoming too involved. Knowing the proper level of involvement in a student's life can really can be one of a professional educator's biggest quandaries.

I am neither suggesting nor advising

teachers and administrators about how much they should be involved in students' lives. My student involvement ranged from solely providing instruction and a grade to offering at-home tutoring to a student who was in a serious car accident; from meeting a student's guardian at back-to-school night to attending the funeral of a student's parent. It ran the gamut. What I am suggesting, which I believe Senechal's words support, is that as educators we must know our role and know (1) that role will change depending on the students and (2) that role must respect and/or accept limitations when they arise.

As we sit with our students and recognize that they have lives outside of

our classroom (some of them difficult, some sufficient, and some ideal), be quick to love them and have compassion for them. Along with that though, we must have enough wisdom to recognize our primary role in students' lives.



Jill Newell is the manager of professional development and communications at the Association of American Educators. She taught English at the secondary level in Utah and Southern California.

Living for Something Greater

Dr. Tom Fleming's life of service to troubled youth



IN MEMORY OF
DR. THOMAS A. FLEMING
JANUARY 19, 1933 – NOVEMBER 4, 2010

IN 1950, Thomas A. Fleming was a high school dropout who couldn't read or write, ran with a tough crowd in the Detroit inner city, and at age 17 faced a bleak, uncertain future, one in which any further schooling seemed unlikely.

Over 40 years later, he shared a podium with the President of the United States, who honored him as the best among 2.5 million elementary and secondary public school teachers in America.

In 1992, President Bush presented Fleming with a crystal apple, the traditional symbol of teaching. The ceremony and national spotlight capped an education career that had the humblest of roots.

He was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, and raised in Detroit by his grandparents. He attended the Detroit Public Schools until age sixteen when he quit school to join the National Guard.

He served in the United States Army for six years with tours in France and Germany. During this time he discovered a deep desire to learn to read in order to understand the teachings of the Bible.

"My basic desire was just to learn to

read the Bible," he once recalled in an interview.

When he returned to the United States, he was determined to complete his education. He attended night school, earned his GED, and enrolled in the Detroit Bible College. At the same time he formed a boys' club at his church and began working with teens in his Detroit neighborhood as well as at the Pontiac and Ypsilanti State Hospitals.

While working with troubled adolescents at the state hospitals, he became interested in the special needs of this population.

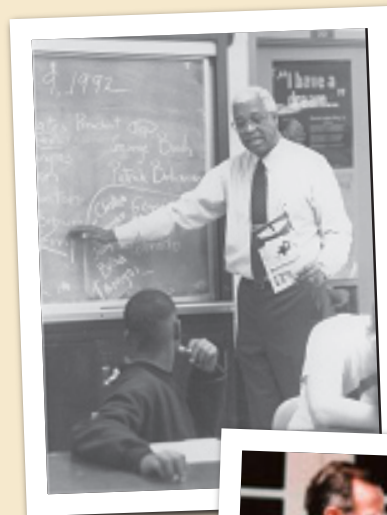
In 1972, he became a teacher on the school program staff of the Washtenaw County Juvenile Detention Center and eventually assumed the responsibilities of head teacher. In that capacity, he worked for more than twenty years with hundreds of delinquent and neglected youth, teaching history, government, and life skills.

Throughout his career he spoke to numerous groups on the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was active in Christian ministry as a preacher and Bible teacher.

He was well known as a religious leader, as a public speaker steeped in the history of the Civil Rights movement, and as a lover and collector of books, particularly those that recorded the history and achievements of people of color.

In 2006, his book collection was established at the Halle Library at EMU as the Fleming Collection of African-American History and Literature.

In September 1991, he was named Michigan Teacher of the Year. In 1992, he was awarded the Crystal Apple Award and named National Teacher of the Year by President George H. Bush in a White House ceremony.



"The student must be challenged to examine not only his or her knowledge but also his or her values."

—Dr. Thomas Fleming



In 1993, he was granted an Honorary Doctorate of Education by Eastern Michigan University.

Dr. Fleming served on the AAE Advisory Board since 1996. "He will be sorely missed," said Gary Beckner, executive director of AAE. "His advice was always guided by compassion. He helped AAE focus its decisions on what is in the best interest of children."

Tom was the beloved husband of Diane and the beloved father of Malcolm Gordon Fleming, Kevin Thomas Fleming, and Sharon (Ryan) Wimberley. He had five grandchildren. His life has been an inspiration to many in the academic community and for so many of his students who have told us, "He changed my life." ■

To read more about Dr. Fleming, visit <http://brand.emich.edu/notablecollection/fleming/about.php>

THE UPPER and lower case for handwriting



By Vicki Cox

Cursive “Q” is dead. It resembled the number two so the post office killed it. But nobody really cares. For that matter, handwriting itself seems in danger of eminent demise. For decades, it’s been ambushed by new technology. The gold-tipped fountain pen and ink bottle from which elaborate loops and curves flowed were replaced by ball point pens. They, in turn, were replaced by felt tip markers which were, in turn, replaced by typewriters. Now, computer and cell phones threaten to be handwriting’s undoing. On the one hand, some say good riddance. But on the other, proponents cite good reasons to keep handwriting in the classroom.

The case against handwriting

Many believe handwriting has no place in a society where speed and technology dominate students’ lives. According to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 90 percent of Americans between the ages of 5 and 17 use computers. At home, the computer is the most important machine in the house. If the stove doesn’t work, there’s carry-out Chinese. But without the computer, the entire family loses communication, shopping, entertainment, and research. Not using computers in the classroom seems short sighted.

“We need to make sure students will be ready for what’s going to happen in 2020 or 2030,” says Katie Van Sluys, DePaul University professor and president of the Whole Language Umbrella, a conference of the National Council of Teachers of English. “Handwriting is increasingly something people do only when they need to make a note to themselves rather than communicate with others.”

For Mary Dockery, language arts teacher in Pike County R-3, the computer makes sense in her composition and literature classes.

“We’re a computer-oriented class,” she says. “If you’re going to teach any kind of writing, it’s all about turning that paper around and getting it back into the student’s hands. I can grade much quicker if I don’t have to figure out what I call artistic, that is unreadable, handwriting.”

The Clopton High School teacher also uses the

computer lab for in-house essays in her college-bound literature class. “If we’ve finished the ‘Idylls of the King,’ I’ll have them write three essays of 350 words each. They have to think fast and type fast. I grade on content and their composition skills.”

Yet, despite the speed and clarity that the computer provides, even it may become passé. The popularity of the cell phone and its access to the Internet increase daily. The new world of text messaging where “CUL-8TR” translates into “See you later” and “BRB” means “Be right back” makes it tough to explain the merits of longhand.

Dockery deals with texting daily. “The rule is that students cannot have cell phones at school,” she says. “But every kid has one. They text all the time. I literally had to check two girls’ purses at the door. They’d put their hands in their purse and text in class.”

Besides electronic technology, standardized testing dealt handwriting a serious blow after the 1983 “A Nation at Risk” report and 2002’s No Child Left Behind Act. When student progress and teacher accountability hinge on the ever-present achievement test, handwriting doesn’t rise very high on the list of priorities.

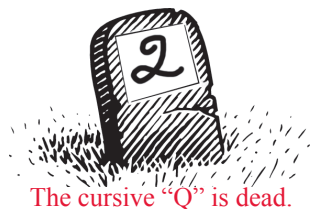
“The simple fact is that kids haven’t learned to write neatly because no one has forced them to,” says Steve Graham, special education and literacy professor at Vanderbilt University. “Writing is just not part of the national agenda anymore.”

No grade level is exempt. While kindergartners and first graders must acquire manuscript skills, they’re mastering communication arts and mathematics objectives too.

At the beginning of the year, Casey Kuhjuergen’s first-grade classes at Mark Twain Elementary in Rolla 31 spend 45 minutes a day on handwriting. They practice strokes, write words, and copy sentences. Gradually instruction time decreases to 25 minutes and then ceases — unless Kuhjuergen notices a pressing need to review technique. By year’s end, the 6-year-olds must be able to write a research report.

“We have so many things we have to fit into

Poor response
estimates
of all
medica



The cursive “Q” is dead.



the schedule,” says Kuhjuergen. “We can’t devote as much time as maybe we should.”

The case for handwriting

Even bombarded with computers and texting outside the classroom, handwriting advocates can’t see them completely replacing the pen and pencil. Their strongest argument is Samuel Freedman’s. He disputes the assumption in a *New York Times* article that “somehow, magically, every pupil, rich or poor, will have a computer available at all times.”

It just isn’t so. Students still depend on handwriting to complete daily assignments, take lecture notes, and complete tests.

There are times when handwriting is just plain more convenient than its technological rivals. It doesn’t, after all, require a cell tower or charged batteries to record a telephone number or person’s name, write a check, or fill out a job application.

Good and/or bad handwriting does, in fact, have unintended consequences. Steve Graham in a recent issue of *American Educator* says studies have shown that “readers form judgments, positive or negative, about the quality of text, based on its legibility. When teachers are asked to rate multiple versions of the same text...neatly written versions of the paper are assigned higher marks for overall quality of writing than are versions with poorer penmanship.”

He also links handwriting difficulties with weaknesses in grammar and content in elementary students. The brain simply can’t do two things at the same time: concentrate on forming letters and compose an idea. Because it chooses the mechanical over the theoretical, composition suffers. Having difficulty with handwriting skills makes students reluctant to write. Avoiding writing increases the possibility they will be poor composers. However, the opposite is also true. Graham says, “Students’ sentence-writing skills, the amount they write, and the quality of their writing all improve with their handwriting.”

Doctors’ notoriously bad handwriting has had disastrous consequences. According to the Institute of Medicine, prescription errors kill 7,000 Americans every year because the majority of the more than three billion prescriptions are written by hand. Poor penmanship is responsible for an estimated 6 percent of all hospital medication errors, says the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

Once handwriting ceased to be a marker of the cultured and educated upper class, children were taught cursive. Then in the 1920s, educators thought because manuscript writing was closer to what students read in textbooks, it should be taught instead. The switch was on. Even today, handwriting double dips into children’s time and energy. They learn manuscript and cursive. Mastering both is a laborious process. Later on, left to their own

preferences, adults develop a kind of hybrid handwriting, a cross between both styles.

Still, Becky Bond, third-grade teacher at Cedar Ridge Elementary in Columbia 93, thinks cursive instruction is necessary.

“It’s a life skill that sometime in a child’s education needs to be taught,” she says. “Will it be a life skill this generation will use forever—probably not. But kids need to have the option of using cursive. At some time, they’ll develop some kind of handwriting. It might as well be right.”

Somehow children regard being able to write in cursive a rite of passage from being “little” to being “a big kid.”

“Seventy-five percent of my kids are very excited to learn it. They can’t wait,” Bond says. “The fun part about it is when they say ‘Look, look! I wrote my name in cursive.’”

For four to five months, Bond devotes approximately 20 minutes three times a week to handwriting. Then, students review and practice it in short assignments. Since they aren’t ready to switch to it full time, they return to writing in manuscript.

However, connecting letters in a continuous stroke makes cursive much faster than manuscript writing. Kate Gladstone, a handwriting specialist in Albany, N.Y., believes high school and college students cannot take accurate notes from a lecture by printing. To keep up with the speaker, the student needs to write 100 words per minute; printing can only produce 30.

But perhaps handwriting’s strongest asset may not be mechanical at all. “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways...,” doesn’t really work on a printout. What people are, and the emotions they feel, sometimes require a more personal touch than technology provides. Handwriting experts have identified more than 5,000 personality traits that are revealed through handwriting. These include how someone organizes his life, his social skills, and his thinking styles. Handwriting analysis is sometimes used in pre-employment screening. Lawyers consider handwriting when selecting potential jurors.

The case for or against handwriting may never reach a black-and-white conclusion. With each new technology, society may think it will finally bury handwriting in a pile of circuitry. But the alternative handwriting offers to communicating, and the intangibles that come with it, ensure it will survive. Even the electronic world acknowledges its value. Some software programs now offer a hybrid of both worlds. They scan the user’s handwriting and turn it into a font that can be typed from the computer. What would John Hancock say about that? ■

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Vicki Cox taught in Waynesville, Missouri, and at Drury University. She is past president of the Missouri Writers Guild and the author of six books.



What You Shouldn't Do

Here is a list of items that you should avoid as a new or veteran teacher. I have only included serious items in my list and have left off such obvious offenses as having affairs with students. However, any of these can create problems for you as a teacher, and if you combine two or more than just expect to really have a hard time gaining student respect and finding your profession enjoyable.

Don't

What say you? We'd like to hear your thoughts on what a teacher shouldn't do. Visit www.aateachers.org/blog.



1 Avoid smiling and being friendly with your students

While you should start each year with a tough stance and the idea that it is easier to let up than to get harder, this does not mean that you shouldn't have students believe that you aren't happy to be there.

2 Become friends with students while they are in class

You should be friendly but not become friends. Friendship implies give and take. This can put you in a tough situation with all the students in the class. Teaching is not a popularity contest and you are not just one of the guys or girls. Always remember that.

3 Stop your lessons and confront students for minor infractions in class

When you confront students over minor infractions in class, there is no possible way to create a win-win situation. The offending student will have no way out and this can lead to even greater problems. It is much better to pull them aside and talk to them one-on-one.

4 Yell

Once you've yelled you've lost the battle. This doesn't mean you won't have to raise your voice every once in awhile but teachers who yell all the time are often those with the worst classes.

5 Humiliate students to try and get them to behave

Humiliation is a terrible technique to use as a teacher. Students will either be so cowed that they will never feel confident in your classroom, so hurt that they will not trust you ever again, or so upset that they can turn to disruptive methods of retaliation.

6 Give your control over to the students

Any decisions that are made in class should be made by you for good reasons. Just because students are trying to get out of a quiz or test does not mean that you should allow that to happen unless there is a good and viable reason. You can easily become a doormat if you give in to all demands.

7 Treat students differently based on personal likes and dislikes

Face it. You are human and there will be kids you will like more than others. However, you must try your hardest never to let this show in class. Call on all students equally. Do not lessen punishments for students you really like.

8 Create rules that are essentially unfair

Sometimes the rules themselves can put you in bad situations. For example, if a teacher has a rule that allows for no work to be turned in after the bell rings,

then this could set up a difficult situation. What if a student has a valid excuse? What makes a valid excuse? These are situations it would be best to just avoid.

9 Gossip and complain about other teachers

There will be days when you hear things from students about other teachers that you just think are terrible. However, you should be noncommittal to the students and take your concerns to the teachers themselves or to administration. What you say to your students is not private and will be shared.

10 Be inconsistent with grading and/or accepting late work

Make sure that you have consistent rules on this. Do not allow students to turn in late work for full points at any time because this takes away the incentive to turn in work on time. Further, use rubrics when you are grading assignments that require subjectivity. This helps protect you and explain the reason for the students' grades. ■



Melissa Kelly is a secondary educator with 15 years of experience. You can read her blog at <http://712educators.about.com/b/>

Less Bang for the Buck

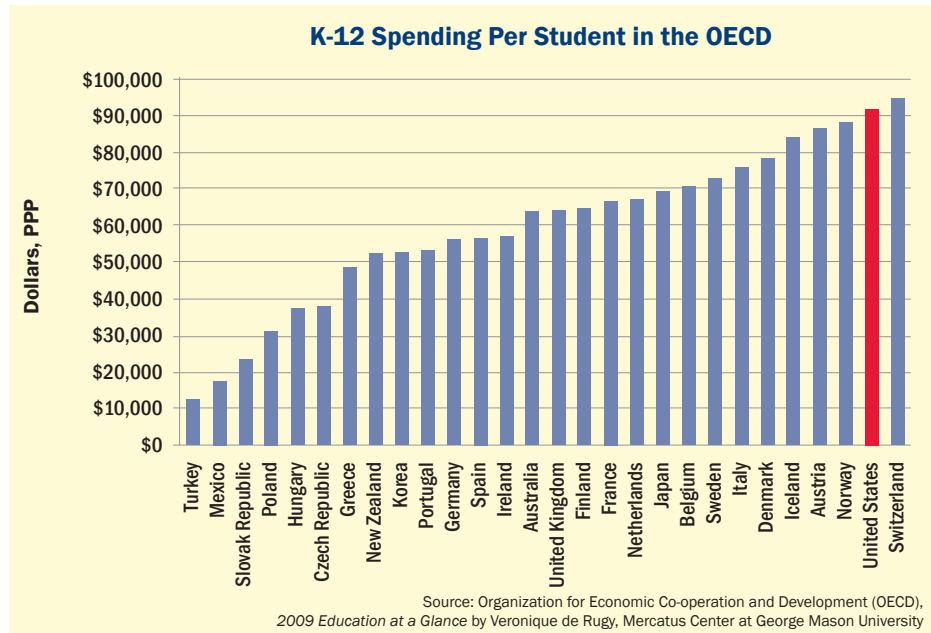
U.S. spends more per student than every nation except one

With the exception of Switzerland, the United States spends more than any other country on education, an average of \$91,700 per student between the ages of six and fifteen. That's not only more than other countries spend but also more than better achieving countries spend—the United States spends a third more than Finland, a country that consistently ranks near the top in science, reading, and math testing.

Veronique de Rugy, a fellow with the Mercatus Center, compiled the data, and reported:

Over the last 40 years, spending per pupil in the US has increased by 200 percent. A high school graduate in 2009 had \$149,000 spent on his thirteen-year public school education; compare this to \$50,000 for a 1970 graduate. Likewise, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of teachers per student in United States public schools has been steadily rising since 1996. Unfortunately, these conventional increases in spending and teaching have not been met with improvements in educational outcomes.

She goes on to comment that the recent results of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test



given to 15-year-old students internationally, find that the United States was, “once again, in the middle of the pack in reading and science and a bit below the international average in math. These results are particularly stunning given how much more we spend than other countries.”

Interschool competition

Dr. de Rugy recommends that “we need to focus on creative solutions that introduce more interschool competition, thus forcing schools to deliver results in order

to keep their students. This would be a marked improvement over the current system which binds students to bad schools with residency requirements.” ■

Source—<http://mercatus.org>. To contact Dr. de Rugy, email rlandaue@gmu.edu.



Dr. Veronique de Rugy



Class Size Reduction a Bust in Florida

Voters continue to support this poor investment of their money

Taking advantage of Florida's phased-in implementation of its 2002 constitutionally-mandated class size reduction, researcher Matt Chingos found no discernible effects on elementary and

middle school student performance, attendance, school violence, or suspension rates. None.

In his words, “the results of this study do strongly suggest that large-scale untargeted class size reduction mandates are not a particularly productive use of limited educational resources.” This research is only the latest in a long line of studies that indicate that across-the-board class size reductions do not improve student performance.

In the eight years that Florida has had these class size caps in place, taxpayers have paid out \$18.7 billion, nearly equaling this year's total state PK-12 budget of \$18.1 billion.

Surely Chingos's research just came out too late to properly educate Florida voters? How else can we explain their defeat of a proposal to roll back the final and most expensive phase of the reduction amendment? Sadly no, the research was out in September. Politicians understand the popularity of class size reduction; apparently we aren't as savvy.

Florida must now proceed full steam ahead with classrooms that may in no circumstances exceed 18 students in grades K-3; 22 in grades 4-8; and 25 in grades 9-12. ■

Source—Teacher Quality Bulletin, a publication of the National Council on Teacher Quality (www.nctq.org)



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Texting Danger

Text messages are top causes of lost teachers' licenses in Tennessee

By Alexandra Schroeck

New technologies have completely revolutionized the way we communicate. From Facebook wall posts to text messages and blogs, we can communicate at all times and almost anonymously. However, this new form of impersonal communication can wreak havoc in the workplace, especially for teachers who work with children. A recent *Associated Press* report finds that more than half of Tennessee teachers who lost their teaching licenses last year were revoked for inappropriate relationships with students, mostly through text messages.

"Technology is making it easier to engage in inappropriate communication with students, and fewer educators are deliberate about how they conduct themselves because it's easier to say something in a text message than in person," said Rich Haglund, an attorney for the Tennessee Board of Education.

Haglund reports that firings due to inappropriate messages have increased in the last year. More than half of the twenty-seven cases in which teachers lost licenses in 2010 involved inappropriate contact with students, records show. Among those, at least seven specifically included texting by the teacher. This behavior was not limited to new hires but veteran teachers as well.

In the state of Tennessee, individual school districts set their policies on contacting students and social media. In Nashville, there are explicit policies on

contacting students and using inappropriate websites.

"The rapid growth of social media and advances in technology have brought as many issues for people as they have provided benefits," Nashville school system spokeswoman Olivia Brown said.

Inappropriate behavior via social networking sites and text messages can be career ending for some. With the dawn of these new technologies, we have posted tips and tricks on how to handle these new and evolving situations.

Well-meaning teachers who see no harm in giving out their cell phone number can often be caught in the crossfire. Be sure to read and understand your specific district's policy about contacting students and be sure to protect your career with liability insurance through AAE. ■

Alexandra Schroeck is AAE communications coordinator. To read her blog posts, visit www.aateachers.org.



More than half of the twenty-seven cases in which teachers lost licenses in 2010 involved inappropriate contact with students.

Text Message and Texting Etiquette Rules

Jennifer Maughan

- 1. Consider where you are text messaging.** It's also considered rude to start texting when you are having a face-to-face conversation with someone.
- 2. When texting, think about the message you are sending.** It is difficult to capture a tone via e-mail or text message, so be straightforward and clear. Sarcasm, for example, is difficult to convey, so steer clear when texting to ensure that your message will be understood.
- 3. Use texting appropriately.** Texting is considered a casual form of communication and therefore should be used to chat with friends and family on a personal level. Keep the casual nature of the communication in mind.

Source: www.life123.com