



# STAFF AND STUDENT PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

## Introduction

St Columba's College is a Mary Aikenhead Ministries College in the tradition of the Sisters of Charity. We are called to develop in each member of our community a contemporary understanding and application of the charism of Mary Aikenhead and the spirituality of the Sisters of Charity, and the Mary Aikenhead Ministries' mission, vision and values of justice, love, compassion and hope.

## Purpose and Objectives

St Columba's College Staff hold a unique position of influence, authority, trust and power in relation to students at the College. As such, it is their duty, at all times, to maintain professional boundaries with students.

A breach of Staff and Student Professional Boundaries may in some circumstances be a criminal offence. The Crimes Act 1958 (Vic) includes certain offences for persons, including teachers, Direct Contact Volunteers and Direct Contact Contractors, whose position places them in a position of care, supervision or authority, with a student. For more information, refer to [Offences Under the Crimes Act 1958 \(Vic\)](#).

The following policy and guidelines are designed to raise awareness of situations where professional boundary violations may occur and some strategies to minimise the risk of boundary violations.

The practice of protective behaviours at all times will also reduce the possibility of vexatious claims being brought against Staff.

## Scope

This Policy applies to:

- College Board members
- all Staff, including the Principal and the Leadership Team, teaching and non-teaching Staff
- all Volunteers
- all Contractors (including External Education Providers),

together, referred to as "Staff" or "staff members" for the purposes of this Policy only. Their age does not matter.

Staff and Student Professional Boundaries apply in all College environments. College environments include, physical, virtual and online environments used during or outside school hours, as well as any

environment (including those outside the College's grounds) where College-related activities are occurring.

Teachers registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) must also comply with principles set out in [The Victorian Teaching Profession's Code of Conduct](#) (VIT Code of Conduct).

## Policy

St Columba's College is committed to providing a safe physical, virtual, online and emotional environment where all of our students are respected and treated with dignity in an appropriate professional and caring manner, the risk of child abuse is minimised and a safe and supportive child safe environment is maintained.

It is our policy that:

- Staff exercise their responsibilities in a way that conforms to professional boundaries with regard to their relationships with students at all times
- Where one on one interactions need to occur between an adult and a child, they should be conducted with high visibility or with line of sight, where this is possible
- Staff identify, discourage and reject any advances of a sexual nature initiated by a student
- Staff interaction with students is professional at all times, including inside and outside of school hours
- Conflict of interest issues must be reported to the Principal, as soon as practicable, via the online form (see Conflict of Interest Policy)
- Equal learning opportunities are given to each student without discrimination
- Appropriate consequences will be applied to Staff who breach professional boundaries.

***It is the College's policy that any breach of Staff and Student Professional Boundaries is a child safety incident that must be reported internally.***

***Any breach that meets the threshold for external reporting must also be reported to the relevant external authority.***

For more information, refer to our procedures for [Responding to and Reporting Child Safety Incidents or Concerns](#).

### What are Professional Boundaries?

Professional boundaries are parameters that describe the limits of a relationship in circumstances where one person (a student) entrusts their welfare and safety to another person (a staff member), in circumstances where a power imbalance exists.

The fact that Staff are in a unique position of trust, care, authority and influence with students means that there is always an inherent power imbalance that exists between them. It also means that professional boundaries must be established, maintained and respected at all times.

In most cases this power imbalance is clear, however, sometimes it may be more difficult to recognise especially for younger Staff who may only be a few years older than their students.

The following guidelines are not exhaustive, and given that sometimes 'grey areas' may occur, it is expected that all Staff (no matter their age or experience) use their own good judgment, think very

carefully about the implications and potential consequences of engaging in certain behaviours with students, and always err on the side of caution.

When unsure about whether professional boundaries are being, or have been, breached, ask yourself:

- Would I modify my behaviour if a colleague was present?
- How would I feel about explaining my actions at a staff meeting, to the Principal, or to parents/carers?
- Am I sharing information for the student's benefit, or for my benefit?
- Am I dealing with this student differently from others in similar circumstances?
- Is my language or demeanour different from normal when dealing with this particular student?

## Intimate Relationships

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any student that has, or can be misinterpreted as having, a romantic or sexual, rather than professional basis. This is regardless of whether the relationship is consensual, non-consensual, or condoned by parents/carers.

Such relationships have a negative impact on the teaching and learning of students and colleagues and may carry a serious reputational risk for the staff member and, in turn, the College.

The professional relationship of Staff and students may be breached by:

- flirtatious behaviour or dating
- development of an intimate personal relationship
- sexual relations
- the use of sexual innuendo, inappropriate language and/or material with students
- unwarranted and inappropriate touching
- unwarranted and inappropriate filming or photography
- deliberate exposure to sexual behaviour of others (e.g. pornography)
- having intimate contact without a valid context via written or electronic means (e.g. email, letters, telephone, text messages, social media sites or chatrooms)
- going out, whether alone or in company, to social events such as the movies or dinner
- exchanging gifts of a personal nature that encourages the formation of an intimate relationship.

## Relationships with Former Students

The imbalance of power and authority that exists in the Staff/student relationship does not suddenly disappear after the student finishes their schooling. Staff should not assume that they will be protected from disciplinary action by claiming that a relationship began only after the student left the College as there may be a reasonable belief that the emotional intimacy of the relationship developed while the Staff/student relationship existed.

For registered teachers, it is a breach of the VIT Code of Conduct for a teacher to have a sexualised relationship with a former student:

- within two years of the learner completing their senior secondary schooling or equivalent; and
- in all circumstances, the former student must be at least 18 years old before a relationship commences.

In addition, if **any** staff member engages in a romantic/sexual relationship with a person who was previously a student at the College, this may generate concerns that the staff member previously crossed professional boundaries while the former student was under the care of the staff member. In

particular, concerns may arise that the staff member engaged in grooming behaviour while the person was still a student.

The College will investigate any complaint that a staff member has abused their position and acted unprofessionally by engaging in a relationship with a former student. In considering whether there has been a breach of professional boundaries, the College may take the following factors into account:

- the nature of the relationship, including its closeness, dependence and significance
- the length of the relationship while the former student was attending the College
- any conduct the staff member undertook which gives cause for concern
- the length of time that has passed between when the person was a student at the College and the commencement of the relationship.

By ensuring that their relationships with St Columba's College students do not breach Staff and Student Professional Boundaries, a staff member who subsequently forms a relationship with a former student will be less likely to be considered to have breached professional boundaries in relation to that former student, provided that the former student is at least 18 years old and at least two years have passed between the time when the former student concluded their senior secondary schooling and the commencement of the relationship.

### Personal Relationships

Staff must not initiate or develop a relationship with any student that is or can be perceived or misinterpreted as having a personal rather than professional element. This is regardless of whether the relationship is consensual, non-consensual, or condoned by parents or carers.

It is the student's perception of staff behaviour and not the intention of the staff member that is important.

An established and expected professional relationship between Staff and students may be compromised by Staff:

- attending parties or socialising with students outside of organised College events (without parental/carer permission)
- sharing personal details about their private lives with students
- meeting with students outside of school hours without permission from the College.

Staff must recognise at all times that their role is not to be a 'friend' or 'parent' to a student.

### Fair Learning Opportunities

The focus of teaching is effective student learning and as such teachers are expected to support their students with their professional expertise so as to offer them the best education in their individual circumstances. The quality of teaching and learning between teachers and students characterises their relationship.

Teachers should demonstrate their commitment to student learning by:

- maintaining a safe and challenging learning environment that promotes mutual respect
- recognising and developing each student's abilities, skills and talents by catering to their individual abilities and respecting their individual differences
- encouraging students to develop and reflect on their own values
- interacting with students without bias

- not engaging in preferential treatment
- not discriminating against any student on the basis of race, sex, sexuality, disability or religious or political conviction
- always making decisions in students' best interests.

### Electronic Communications Between Staff and Students

It is expected that all Staff and Students at the College will adhere to the following guidelines (to be read in conjunction with the Staff Digital Citizenship Policy and the Student Digital Citizenship Policy):

- all use of technology should be for educational purposes or for the organisation of co-curricular activities
- all email communication between Staff and students should be via the College email system or the SEQTA Direct Message System and reflect a professional Staff/student relationship
- Staff should not communicate with students via text message
- Staff should not give out their personal telephone numbers or social media contact details
- Staff are not to accept or request students as 'friends' on social media or otherwise use social media to communicate in any way that is not condoned or approved by the College
- Staff should not exchange personal pictures with a student
- Teachers are not expected or encouraged to respond to concerns of parents/legal guardians or students on holidays, weekends or in the evening
- Any student personal contact numbers or other personal contact details made available to the College should only be used for College communications
- Staff, students and parents/legal guardians will adhere to the College Email Policy Families and Students and the Staff Email Communication Policy.

### Physical Contact with Students

All Staff should be aware that situations may arise that can be perceived in a manner that was not intended. For this reason, all Staff at the College should adhere to the following guidelines for contact with students both in and outside of College grounds:

- Staff should avoid unnecessary physical contact with students
- minimal, non-lingering, non-gratuitous physical contact in the context of the situation is acceptable (e.g. congratulatory pat on the back or handshake)
- contact for sport, drama and dance instruction is acceptable in a class situation but not in a 1:1 situation. If physical contact is required for specific technical instructions, it must be brief and only with the consent of the student. Note that a student may withdraw consent for this contact either verbally or gesturally and Staff must remain vigilant while engaging in necessary contact situations. Once consent has been withdrawn no further contact can be or should be made.

### Off-Campus Excursions and Camps

During off-campus excursions or camps, the same physical contact guidelines apply as well as the following:

- checking of sleeping arrangements, or supervising of students changing should be done, where possible, with another staff member present and always in a manner that respects students' privacy and personal space
- always knock and advise of presence prior to entering a bedroom or dormitory
- ensure that while in a bedroom or dormitory a strict Staff/student relationship is upheld and that inappropriate behaviour, such as sitting on a student's bed, is not undertaken

### Managing Conflicts of Interest

Where personal relationships with students such as family relationships and close friendship networks exist, questions of conflicts of interest may arise.

This may be more prevalent in close or rural communities where professional boundaries may be tested due to the nature and size of the community. In these circumstances, Staff need to be far more diligent in developing and maintaining these boundaries.

Where a staff member feels that a conflict of interest may exist, they should notify the Principal, or the Deputy Principal if the conflict involves the Principal, and arrangements should be implemented to avoid the conflict situation if possible. For example, the teaching of students by a staff member with a conflict should be avoided.

Any significant decisions relating to these students in the College (such as the appointment of classes or selection in sports teams) should be referred to another staff member and endorsed by a supervisor.

### Declarations of Staff/Student Interactions

To enable the College to be aware of appropriate and inappropriate interactions between Staff and students, it is St Columba's College's policy that all Staff are encouraged to declare any interactions with students outside the College context using the "Conflict of Interest Register" link in the LMS. These interactions may include situations where the staff member is:

- related to the student
- friends with the student's parents or family
- given parental consent to interact with the student for academic purposes outside of school hours and the parent/carer has notified the College.

Declarations by Staff about a relationship with students and their families outside of the College context or about interactions that occur with the consent of the parent/carer must be verified by the parent/carer of the student.

St Columba's College maintains records of all declarations made by staff members related to their interactions with students, or relationships with students, that exist outside of school hours or College premises. These records are made available to the parents/carers of a student on request.

These records are kept in accordance with our Child Safety Record Keeping and Human Resources Management policies.

### Responsibilities

All Staff must:

- follow the guidelines as set out in this Policy
- immediately report any conflicts of interest
- remove themselves from decision-making where a conflict has been identified.

### Breach of this Policy and Procedures

Where a staff member breaches this Policy, St Columba's College may take disciplinary action that may include (depending on the severity of the breach):

- remedial education
- counselling

- increased supervision
- the restriction of duties
- suspension, or
- in the case of serious breaches, termination of employment, contract or engagement.

## Implementation

These guidelines are implemented through a combination of:

- staff training and development in professional conduct
- student and parent/carer education and information
- effective management of teachers engaging in inappropriate relationships with students
- effective management of conflicts of interest
- effective communication and incident notification procedures
- effective record keeping procedures
- initiation of corrective actions where necessary.

## Report Any Concerns

### Staff

It is the College's policy that any breach of this Professional Boundaries Policy is a child safety incident. Therefore, all Staff, Direct Contact and Regular Volunteers, and Direct Contact and Regular Contractors who witness, or suspect, any breach of professional boundaries must report their concern internally and, if required, also externally.

Our Child Safety Program includes information for Staff, Volunteers and Contractors about how to identify key indicators of child abuse or other harm and how to report child safety concerns internally. It also contains detailed procedures about when and how to report child safety incidents or concerns to relevant authorities. For more information, refer to our procedures for [Procedures for Responding to and Reporting Child Safety Incidents or Concerns](#).

### Students

The College provides students with information about and encourages them to use multiple pathways to raise child safety concerns about or at the College, including breaches of the Staff and Student Professional Boundaries. These include informal and formal ways, an 'anonymous' way, and through external child advocacy or child safety organisations. For more information, refer to [Complaints Policy](#).

### Parents/Legal Guardians, Family Members or Other Community Members

Parents/Legal Guardians, family members or other community members who witness or suspect that there has been a breach of Professional Boundaries, or have concerns that a child or young person associated with the College may be subject to abuse or harm from a member of Staff, a Volunteer or a Contractor, should contact:

- the College's Senior Child Protection Officer, Brigitte McDonald, Deputy Principal, by phoning 03 9337 5311 or emailing [mcdonaldb@columba.vic.edu.au](mailto:mcdonaldb@columba.vic.edu.au) or the Principal; or
- if the concern relates to the Principal, the Board Chair.

Communications will be treated confidentially on a 'need to know basis'.

***Whenever there are concerns that a child or young person is in immediate danger, the Police should be contacted on 000.***

POLICY HISTORY AND SCHEDULE

Date of Approval: August 2023  
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Delegated Contact Person: College Principal  
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