AVOIDING PROFESSIONAL PITFALLS
The purpose of this presentation is to provide an overview of the professional expectations that align with Polk County School Board (PCSB) Policy. The information presented is meant to raise the level of awareness about responsible professional behavior on and off the job for all PCSB employees. All PCSB employees, regardless of job title, are bound to comply with Board Policy as a condition of continued employment.
How To Avoid Professional Pitfalls

Each year, School Board employees find themselves in situations that can result in discipline. **These situations are easily avoided and often preventable.**

In addition to School Board Policy, the School Board of Polk County expects **ALL** school personnel to adhere to the *Code of Ethics and the Principles of Professional Conduct of the Education Profession* (Polk County Policies 1210, 3210 and 4210).

- The School Board of Polk County Policies can be found on the District’s website at [http://www.neola.com/polk-fl/](http://www.neola.com/polk-fl/).

Key Areas of Concern

- Student Interaction
- Maintaining a Safe Educational Environment
- Misuse of District Computers and/or District E-mail
- Social Media Guidelines and Expectations
- Financial Transactions
- Conflict of Interest
- Attendance
- Respect and Civility
- Mandatory Reporting Requirements
Student Interaction

One on One Situations – Always maintain a professional barrier between you and the students.

- If possible, avoid being alone with a student, especially outside of the educational setting.
  - Tutoring in public locations or in the presence of the student’s parent/guardian is suggested.
- Keep classroom doors open when meeting with a student before or after school.
- Avoid putting yourself in a situation where it becomes your word against another person’s word.
Student Interaction

Verbal Communication - Employees can find themselves in trouble when discussing personal and/or inappropriate information with students.

- Communication with students must remain appropriate to the given situation at all times. Employees should avoid sharing personal beliefs or opinions on topics such as politics and/or religion.

- Do not discuss your personal matters or issues with students.

- Use common sense and good judgement. Think before you speak, and ask yourself if your comments could be taken out of context or misinterpreted.

- All communication must reflect the inclusive, respectful philosophy of the District regardless of personal beliefs.
Student Interaction

Notes or Jokes

Personal notes should never be written to a student unless the note deals solely with an educational matter. What you think is an innocent message could be considered offensive to someone else. This includes sending personal text messages to students.

Dramatic Displays of Frustration - Staff should never engage in:

- Grabbing materials from students
- Slamming materials on desk tops
- Kicking chairs, garbage cans or other classroom items
Student Interaction

Touching Students - Anytime an employee places their hands on a student they are putting themselves and the District at risk.

Common issues are:
- Grabbing a student with the purpose to gain their attention and/or correct a negative behavior
- Aggressive behavior towards a student as a result of your frustration
- Improperly restraining or transporting ESE students

*Ask yourself, regardless of what actually happened, could it be misperceived?*
Student Interaction

It is important to note all staff members have a responsibility to promote and maintain a safe educational environment.

- Should it become necessary for a teacher to use reasonable force to maintain classroom/school order, the teacher shall follow the guidelines as provided in the *Code of Student Conduct*.
- Expectations and guidelines for teacher authority can be found in *Teacher Collective Bargaining Agreement* Article X, and in *Paraeducator Collective Bargaining Agreement* Article V.
- Sections 1006.11 and 1012.75, *Florida Statutes*, outline the appropriate use of force that may be used by school personnel in maintaining a safe and secure learning environment.
Protect Your Professional Image

Although your intentions may not be to harm any student, your interactions may be perceived differently by the student and/or a potential witness such as other students, parents, administration, or District personnel.
Be Proactive

Communicating any incident accurately will allow administration to take a proactive approach to engage necessary parties in resolving the situation.

- It is important to provide specific detailed information regarding any potential concerns.

- If a parent were to call regarding any negative interaction with a staff member, the administrator would be prepared to respond.

- In the event interactions with a student were perceived as inappropriate or aggressive, an investigation by the appropriate law enforcement agency, FL Department of Children and Families, and/or the District’s Employee Relations Department could occur. The purpose of the investigation is ensure student safety, rule out any criminal wrongdoing, and/ or determine whether any professional standards were violated.
District Computer Use

All email sent to and from Polk County Public Schools is subject to the Public Records Law of Florida.

District computers are for school/ District-related work only

- Almost any activity on District computers can be recovered, even if it has been deleted from the hard drive, including every e-mail sent or received through your PCSB e-mail address.

- School computers can and may be held to public scrutiny.
  - Employees are prohibited from viewing and/ or downloading inappropriate content on District computers.
  - You should not be using your work email for personal, political, or editorial use.

- Schoolwide emails should be appropriate and should have educational purpose.
  - Avoid sending emails that solicit personal interests or discuss off-site functions unrelated to work, i.e., sending an open invitation regarding happy hour on the last day of school.
Social Media Guidelines and Expectations

Guidelines and Expectations have been developed to foster safe interactions between students and Polk County School Board employees.

- Employees should not publicly discuss or disparage students on their personal social media page – this includes, but is not limited to Facebook, Twitter, personal blog sites.

- Employees should avoid sending private messages to students through personal social media accounts and are discouraged from accepting or initiating invitations to “friend” students.

- Posting information that libels a colleague or student may affect your employment.

- Use good judgment when posting personal information on social media sites. You cannot guarantee who will see what you post.

  - Examples: Inappropriate photos, status posts, and/or comments posted on social media sites or pages that may be considered offensive.
Social Media Guidelines and Expectations

Maintaining School-Based Social Media Accounts - Employees who manage officially recognized social media accounts are expected to post important, relevant, and interesting material. Employees should strive to post only information that will be useful to and appreciated by their community/network. Administration should have sign-on information for all such accounts.

Examples of post-worthy materials include:

- Good news/what's happening at your school/site
- Picture of the Day/other school-related pictures (Verify students have media releases.)
- Short/Long form videos/People of Polk (Verify students have media releases.)
- Weather emergencies/bus info
- School Nutrition meal emergencies
- Other emergencies
- Event reminders
- Congratulations on big accomplishments
- Parent notification call scripts

For additional information regarding Polk County Schools’ Guidelines for Social Media and Internet Safety, please refer to [http://www.polk-fl.net/staff/resources/internetsafety.htm](http://www.polk-fl.net/staff/resources/internetsafety.htm), and Board Policies 7540.03 and 7540.04.
Financial Transactions

Employees should avoid handling District funds, collecting student monies, or fundraising unless they completely understand and follow the procedures for Internal Accounts established by the District’s Internal Audit Services.

- Theft or misuse of public funds could lead to termination of employment, legal action, and the forfeiture of the employee’s FL Retirement System (FRS) retirement benefits.
  - This includes submitting fraudulent information for free or reduced lunch.

- Resources: School Board Policy 8700 - Anti-Fraud, Employee Handbook Section 2 - Money Collection
Conflict of Interest

A conflict of interest is a situation in which your primary responsibility is compromised by competing priorities.

- Tutoring students on your roster and charging a fee.
- Accepting gifts with a monetary value from students/parents.
- Using District PCSB email account to promote outside activities, events, services, and/or products that may result in personal profit.
Attendance

Regular attendance is an essential function of every Polk County School Board employee. Satisfactory performance is characterized by being at work a sufficient number of days to accomplish the essential tasks of the position without having to distribute work to other employees, or to delay those essential tasks.

- Satisfactory performance is generally characterized by not exceeding the combined number or sick and/or vacation days which are earned annually by an employee, with the exception of Board-approved leaves of absence or other District leave.
  - Sick leave and personal leave chargeable to sick (PLCS) leave are not separate accruals. PLCS time is a portion of an employee’s accrued sick time.
  - Employees are expected to work their contracted hours each day (with the exception of sick, personal, and/or vacation absences) and must sign in and out daily, as appropriate to the position, with the correct hours worked. Inaccurately documenting time worked is considered fraud and may result in discipline, up to and including termination of employment.
  - Vacation (12-month employees) must be approved in advance by the administrator.
  - See the respective collective bargaining agreement for additional leave provisions.
Respect and Civility

Polk County School Board Policies 1362, 3362, 4362 and 5517 promote mutual respect, civility, and orderly conduct among all employees, students, parents, and the general public. It is intended to maintain, to the extent that is possible and reasonable, a safe, harassment-free workplace for students, families, and staff, that is free of disruptive, demeaning, intimidating, threatening, or aggressive behavior.

- All employees are expected to treat students, parents, fellow staff members, and members of the public with respect and will expect the same in return.
- Staff will not use obscenities or speak in a demanding, loud, insulting, or threatening manner.
- Volatile, hostile, or aggressive actions and words will not be tolerated, and individuals who engage in this behavior may face disciplinary action up to, and including, termination of employment.
Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse

It is the responsibility of all school personnel to promptly report known or suspected cases of child abuse, abandonment, or neglect according to Section 39.201, *Florida Statutes*, and School Board Policy 8462, directly to the central abuse hotline:

**1-800-96-ABUSE** (1-800-962-2873)

Report situations not requiring immediate attention online: http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse/report/

Employees have immunity from liability if they report such cases in good faith; and have a duty to comply with child protective investigations and all other provisions of law relating to child abuse, abandonment, and neglect, as provided in Section 39.203, *Florida Statutes*. 
Mandatory Reporting of Misconduct by Certificated Employees

It is the responsibility of all employees of the Board to promptly report to the office of the Superintendent or the Human Resources Services Division any complaint against a member of the instructional staff that comes to the employee's attention and that includes grounds for the revocation or suspension of a teaching certificate. The willful failure by an employee of the Board to promptly report a complaint shall constitute cause for discipline of the employee as provided by law and School Board Policy.
Resources

Additional information regarding professional expectations can be found at http://www.polk-fl.net/staff/employeeinfo/hrs/employeerelations.htm:

- Employee Handbook and Benefits Information,
- the six collective bargaining agreements for union positions,
- or by contacting your administrator.