

► Don't Think It Can't Happen to You

When you decided to become a teacher, you probably never thought you could become the target of a news story. Yet, year after year, new teachers are accused of some type of inappropriate relationship with a student and the media takes the news and runs with it.

Of course, in some cases, the allegations are true, but in many cases, they're not. By the time an investigation is completed and the truth is known, it may be too late to save your reputation.

Take the steps necessary to protect your good name, your reputation and your career. The local association and your UniServ director are always ready to offer you legal assistance. One of the benefits of being a member of the Michigan Education Association is the \$1 million dollars in liability insurance you have in the event you are accused of a criminal offense while performing your duties as a teacher.

It's sad that we have to worry about our relationship with our students, but we live in a society that watches carefully what kind of a role model you are. Try these strategies to avoid liability:

- **Maintain your personal space.** Young children are eager to show their affection and want to touch you, or just hang on you for attention. Older students may interpret your behavior or actions as an invitation to a romantic relationship. You can't let students invade your space. Set the tone that demonstrates you will respect the students' space also.
- **Watch what you say.** Choose your words carefully. An innocent remark or comment can become a suggestive "come on" when students report the incident to parents. The whole context of what you said may become so distorted that you're now in a battle to save your career and reputation.
- **Don't discuss sexually explicit topics.** Don't be drawn into conversations regarding such topics, song lyrics, jokes or movies. Unless it's a part of the school-adopted curriculum, try to stop those conversations in your presence.
- **Don't be alone with students.** Avoid being alone with a student. Make sure you can be seen by another adult. After school detention, keeping a student in from recess, make-up tests and tutoring should be scheduled so that there are other adults in view. They can serve as corroborating witnesses should a student accuse you of improper behavior.
- **Don't become "friends" with your students.** Maintain the line that you are their teacher. When students blur this line, they can become too comfortable with you and make assumptions about their relationship with you.
- **Don't socialize with students.** Being seen in public with a student can lead to people assuming the worst.
- **Don't ever think being falsely accused can't happen to you.** It can.