

# LEADERSHIP UPDATE

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## Evaluation: Acting Professionally When Faced With an Anonymous Questionnaire

### The Problem

Anonymous questionnaires have been used extensively in assessing schools, programs and satisfaction with the educational progress of students; assessing teachers; and assessing central office personnel. Such questionnaires are notoriously unreliable, and are unethical when members are commenting on the professional performance or reputation of a colleague.

The use of anonymous comments from students, parents and school employees in a manner that reduces assessment of school performance to a public-relations exercise is abhorrent. Schools and school staff should be subject to open, honest, fair and effective evaluation by objective criteria and standards. Whether presented as general surveys, evaluation documents or direct questions posed in writing or by interview, anonymity permits inaccurate comments to be made with impunity. The Code of Professional Conduct requires members to address concerns about a colleague with that colleague before seeking other avenues of complaint.

### Guidelines for Action

1. Questionnaires that ask teachers to comment on the professional performance or professional reputation of a colleague may not be submitted anonymously. A copy of a report must be provided in advance to the teacher. Reports may be submitted only in good faith and only to proper authorities.
2. A teacher who completes anonymous questionnaires about the competence, reputation or performance of a teacher or who directs other teachers to complete such questionnaires may be charged with unprofessional conduct and required to appear before a hearing committee of a Professional Conduct Committee. Conviction on a charge of unprofessional conduct could lead to a reprimand, a severe reprimand, a fine, a combination of a reprimand and a fine, or, in severe cases, suspension or expulsion from membership in the Association.
3. No person can relieve teachers of their professional responsibilities under the code. One teacher cannot permit other teachers to submit anonymous questionnaires about that individual.
4. Teachers cannot be required to complete a questionnaire that causes a violation of the code. Teachers may leave blank the entire questionnaire or only those questions to which responding would mean violating the code.
5. Teachers presented with a questionnaire for submission to a proper authority may choose to respond, sign the questionnaire and present it to the teacher whose competence, professional performance or professional reputation is being judged. The person being judged may, after a reasonable time, forward the questionnaire and attachments, including a personal response if desired, to the appropriate authority.

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**Perhaps  
the most  
valuable  
result of all  
education  
is the ability  
to make  
yourself do  
the thing  
you have  
to do, when  
it ought to  
be done,  
whether you  
like it or not.**

**—Thomas  
Huxley**



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## Rationale and Professional Considerations

The Alberta Teachers' Association endorses fair and ethical evaluation of schools, programs and individuals. Anonymous comments are neither fair nor ethical. Teachers must consider

- professional conduct, particularly the Code of Professional Conduct, clauses 13, 14 and 18. All active members must comply with this enforceable code. Anonymous comments could be found unprofessional for reasons that extend beyond the code;
- the *School Act*: boards are required to act reasonably. There is thus a duty of fairness toward their employees;
- the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which recognizes that there are acceptable limitations to the fundamental right of free speech;
- the rules of natural justice, which apply at all times. These rules require that both sides of an issue be heard without bias;
- the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, which considers opinions about another individual to be personal information. Information can be used only for a purpose consistent with the purpose for which it was collected and only in a manner consistent with the act;

- Association policy and practice, which obligate natural justice and revealing of the source of concerns. Teachers have consistently placed the obligation on themselves to refrain from anonymous comments about others and encourage a similar ethical standard for others.

Evaluators are not restricted from asking questions of members about colleagues. Procedures used must be consistent with the considerations above. They must be consistent with the code, the charter and conventional principles of fairness.



Q & A

GORDON THOMAS,  
Executive Secretary

**Q:** Can the teachers on my staff participate in planning graduation exercises and parties?

**A:** Teachers, even those who are parents of students graduating, should restrict their involvement in graduation ceremonies to the school-based activities. This would include the presentation ceremonies (whether they take place in the school or not) and a school-sponsored dance or other celebration activity that is school sanctioned and therefore would be under school rules and board policies, and protected by school jurisdiction insurance policies.

Teachers should not become involved in planning for “Safe Grad” parties, bush parties with organized safe drivers, home parties or any other activity that may expose them to legal, financial and professional liability in the event that something goes wrong. Involvement of school staff in the planning, **even allowing the planning to take place on school property**, may expose the staff member, the principal and the district to a lawsuit in the event of an incident. It is best to say “no” to involvement at a very early stage. Even if the likelihood of problems appears low and efforts are made to minimize the risk, there are too many variables (ie, party crashers, weather, limited access to health services, etc) and the resulting consequences are too high.

Even if a teacher acts solely as a parent, other parents may still look upon that person as a teacher who will maintain a professional standard throughout. A teacher is expected to maintain a high level of conduct, especially in any situation which may involve the safety of children. One must not, for example, become involved in any activity that could involve the illegal consumption of alcohol.

For all of these reasons, we advise teachers to stay away from planning or participating in graduation-related activities that are not sanctioned by proper authorities.

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