

Relationships with students: teachers caned

BY MICHELLE SUTTON

Last updated 05:00 11/07/2010

National

The nature of teaching means sexual and inappropriate relationships will always occur between staff and students, says the Teachers Council after releasing figures showing it happens about a dozen times a year.

This month it also released details on the latest teacher banned from the profession, after he met his "first true love" – a Year 8 female student he taught.

Since the Teachers Council was set up in 2002, the number of sexual or inappropriate relationships between teachers and students has averaged about 12 a year, peaking at 18 in 2004 and dropping to 10 last year.

Peter Lind, Teachers Council director, last week told the Sunday Star-Times that sexual and inappropriate student-teacher relationships would never be eliminated.

"You would expect there would be that number of cases coming through with the nature of the job."

The type of student most likely to be involved in an inappropriate relationship has been described by John O'Neill, Massey University education professor, as someone feeling vulnerable at school, at home or in social situations.

Similar triggers lead to students using drugs or alcohol to cope.

Teachers lacking confidence and feeling vulnerable were also the most likely to be involved.

"You could equate it to a general human condition where if people feel vulnerable in their personal lives then they look for a way of compensating to cope with that," O'Neill said.

He is calling for research into why these relationships occur, and greater professional leadership from the Teachers Council and teacher training providers, to prevent it from happening.

O'Neill, who toured the country delivering a code of ethics to teachers, said the current message around unacceptable behaviour was obviously failing to get through to some teachers.

"Rather than say this must not happen, if we know that it is happening then the first step surely is to understand why it's happening."

Lind said the number of cases had decreased compared to the number of registered teachers. There had been an increase of almost 40% to 96,000 registered teachers since 2002, but that was not reflected in the number of serious misconduct cases.

However, there have already been at least four cases of sexual violation and indecent assault by teachers dealt with by the courts this year.

This month details were also released about the latest teacher banned from the profession for serious misconduct. He sent love letters and text messages to a student, aged about 13, saying "thank you 4 choosing 2 love me".

The teacher and the student used to meet outside of school and sexual overtones began to develop in their texts. There was at least one episode involving intimate physical contact, but not sexual relations.

The man's registration was cancelled by the council after he was found to have developed an inappropriate relationship with the student last year.

The man, who was married, wrote to the girl, saying "being able 2 hold u and kiss u has just been the best feeling" and "u r my first true love".

He also exchanged text messages increasingly frequently saying "you should have given me a hug" and "I am feeling horny".

The man, who was stood down from his school late last year, was ordered to pay almost \$3000 in costs to the student.

Lind said he knows of rare cases where legitimate relationships had developed that lasted a lifetime.

Although the council's code of ethics clearly set out that inappropriate or sexual relationships with a student were never OK, difficulties sometimes arose, particularly in cases when a first-year teacher would be only four to five years older than a senior student and a genuine relationship developed.

"Some of those cases might be true love and people may end up in a relationship that lasts a lifetime, but we are really concerned about the abuse of power."

michelle.sutton@star-times.co.nz

- Sunday Star Times