



Safe Environment

Diocese of Wheeling - Charleston

Spring 2023

Review Board Expansion, Robust Audit Process Show Commitment to Safety

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston's Independent Review Board recently approved policy updates and expanded its scope to include boundary violations and other adult misconduct involving employees and volunteers, in addition to its work regarding clergy sex abuse of minors.

Also starting with 2023, yearly on-site Safe Environment audits of parishes and schools are conducted. This is in addition to the data collection audits that also happen on a yearly basis.

The combination of additional audits and expansion in scope of the Review Board are designed to increase safety and accountability throughout the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, according to Bishop Mark Brennan.

The diocese's Independent Review Board is comprised of subject matter experts with experience in medicine, human resources, law enforcement, religious, and sex abuse/mental health. The Review Board's primary functions are to ensure that the diocese adheres to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops'

Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People and to advise the Bishop on Safe Environment-related matters. *Charter* mandates focus on sex abuse of minors by clergy.

“Our focus continues toward transparency, prevention, and healing.”

- Bishop Mark Brennan

“As a matter of best practice, our Review Board reviews the diocese's Sex Abuse Policy on a yearly basis, every October,” said Bishop Brennan, who asked members to consider and debate the expansion of scope and other matters. “For the 2022 policy review process, I asked them to specifically consider to whom the policy should apply, as well as an expansion in scope to include other adult-related behavioral issues, in addition to clergy sex abuse of minors. What has resulted is a clearer, somewhat broader, and more robust policy that will further our efforts of creating a culture of safety not only for children and vulnerable adults in West Virginia, but for everyone. The Review Board has been doing this work for some time, and now it has been formalized.”

Bishop Brennan also implemented the yearly on-site audits starting in 2023, with an on-site audit conducted during the week of March 27th. Nine parishes and schools were randomly selected for on-site auditing, and the results will be provided in writing by Stonebridge Business Partners, the auditing agency, to the Diocese in the coming weeks. The USCCB requires data collection audits every year and on-site Safe Environment audits every three years for dioceses across the US; however, bishops may elect to be on-site audited every year as a means to strengthen compliance and safety. Bishop Brennan has elected the yearly on-site auditing option. The Diocese's fingerprint vendor, Corporate Security Investigations (CSI), also performs auditing/spot checks when they are at Catholic schools and parishes for fingerprinting operations as yet another layer of accountability.

In 2002, the USCCB issued the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, a document which mandates Safe Environment requirements and mechanisms to hold U.S. dioceses accountable for the protection of children and vulnerable adults. The Charter was developed as a result of the clergy sex abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, here and around the world. In the U.S., clergy, employees, and volunteers are required to undergo background checks, sex abuse awareness training, receipt and review of the diocese's Sex Abuse Policy, and acknowledgements related to mandated reporting and a Code of Conduct. In addition, the diocese requires fingerprinting and completion of monthly training bulletins for clergy and those who are employed in Catholic schools.

The Independent Review Board strengthened the diocese's policy by:



- **Expanding the scope of the diocese's Independent Review Board:** The Review Board will always prioritize clergy-related sex abuse of minor claims, in accordance with the *Charter*. However, the board's scope now also includes boundary violations and other adult behavioral issues and concerns relative to clergy as well as

employees and volunteers. Diocesan review boards across the U.S. are implementing best practices to address other areas of concern and impropriety, in addition to those central to the clergy sex abuse crisis. The Independent Review Board in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston has been moving in this direction for the past several years and formalized this best practice through policy changes at its January 2023 meeting.

- **Updating language to include guidelines and best practices** for use of social media, digital and internet platforms, and electronic communications; expanded and modern reporting mechanisms; and further clarity regarding the inappropriateness of all types of pornography. "Patterns illustrate that inappropriate use of the internet can create significant problems, especially for our school-age children, and often for adults as well," Bishop Brennan said. "The updates relative to this language are not drastic, but they are impactful, and provide clarity on what is considered appropriate versus inappropriate. The updated language addresses more modern technology."

- **Including a comprehensive list of employee and volunteer roles at the parish and school level to which the Safe Environment process applies in an effort to assist clergy and staff as they manage the administration of locations and programs.** "I really believe this list will help our priests and the people who support them," said Fr. Dennis Schuelkens, Vicar for Clergy for the diocese and an Independent Review Board member. "The new list makes things very clear. I anticipate this will make things easier for everyone." The list may be found at www.dwc.org, under Diocese > Offices > Office of Safe Environment > Diocesan Policy. The list is on the last two pages of the policy booklet. It is reproduced here as well:

Safe Environment compliance applies to those aged 18 or older.

- All priests, deacons, and seminarians
- All employees at Catholic schools
- All volunteers at Catholic schools

- All volunteers affiliated with sports, including coaches, concessions, score keepers, referees, and any other roles
- All employees and volunteers of daycare centers
- Professionals or special guests whose roles require regular or recurring presence in the Catholic school or at Catholic school activities or the parish (recurring may include: daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly)
- All parish employees
- All employees of any other diocesan-related entity
- Parish volunteers including (age 18 and older):

- Adult altar servers
- Eucharistic ministers
- Readers/Lectors
- Greeters
- Ushers
- Money Collectors/Counters
- Sacristans
- Choir/Music Director/Choir

Members/Musicians

- Cantors
- Directors of Religious Education
- Parish School of Religion teachers

- All adult volunteers affiliated with youth and/or youth group activities in any capacity
- All adult volunteers affiliated with youth/summer camps in any capacity
- All adult volunteers affiliated with Vacation Bible School in any capacity
- All adult volunteers involved in any activity that includes or involves children in any way
- Funeral luncheon volunteers
- Fish fry volunteers
- Festival volunteers
- Picnic volunteers
- Homebound ministries or any activities relative to vulnerable adults
- Any activities/ministries involving nursing homes and/or nursing home residents
- Any activities relative to Boy and Girl Scout councils
- Any activities involving childcare, babysitting, or before and aftercare
- Any volunteers who provide maintenance services in parishes or schools



These updates were formalized and took effect on January 11, 2023, at the Independent Review Board’s first meeting of the year. The Independent Review Board meets quarterly as well as on an on-call basis, if warranted.

Bishop Brennan said the diocese continues to encourage reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if criminal conduct has been alleged. The diocese also continues to promote use of EthicsPoint, a mechanism for anonymous reporting of various concerns that are not limited to sex abuse. The diocese also encourages reporting to the national Catholic Bishop Abuse Reporting website.

Regarding sex abuse-related claims, the Diocese does not request or require non-disclosure agreements as part of civil settlements. However, the Diocese does respect confidentiality when requested by victims. Funds to settle claims are paid from investment income. They are not paid using any funds donated through parishes, schools, or fundraising appeals.

“Our focus continues toward transparency, prevention, and healing,” Bishop Brennan said. “We have made significant moves over the past few years to illustrate our commitment to the people of the diocese in this regard. We are thankful for our priests, our deacons, our employees, and our volunteers, and we hope these updates reaffirm our desire for the safety and productivity of all as we live, learn, and worship in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.”

Why Is There an Office of Safe Environment?

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) requires that all Dioceses/Eparchies have in place a Safe Environment Program for the protection of children and young people. The “*Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*” was adopted by the USCCB in June 2002 as a response to sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests and deacons, particularly from the time period of 1950 to 2002. The USCCB established an **Office of Child and Youth Protection** to oversee the application of the Charter’s principles and to create the means for accountability for ensuring implementation of standards.



Reporting

The Diocese encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been committed. There are several mechanisms for reporting.

To Report to Civil Authorities:

Contact your local law enforcement; numbers will vary based on your location. If you believe someone is in immediate danger, call 911. To confidentially report any incidence of suspected child abuse or neglect, including sexual abuse, contact the West Virginia Bureau for Children and Families’ Child Protective Services by calling the Child Abuse Hotline at 800-352-6513.

To Report Abuse by a Bishop of the Catholic Church:

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston encourages reporting to civil authorities first and foremost if a crime has been committed. We also encourage utilizing www.reportbishopabuse.org to report. If you have reason to believe that a bishop has engaged in sexual misconduct or has interfered with an investigation into sexual

misconduct, please contact civil authorities in the applicable jurisdiction and visit www.reportbishopabuse.org.

To the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston:

The Diocese encourages reporting to the appropriate civil authorities first and foremost as well as to the appropriate church authorities. To report suspected cases of sexual abuse of children by clergy, religious or lay personnel of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston to the Diocese, please contact one of the Bishop’s designees at 1-888-434-6237: Bryan Minor, ext. 263; Tim Bishop, ext. 353; Very Rev. Dennis R. Schuelkens Jr., V.E., ext. 270; or please call the Office of Safe Environment at 304.230.1504. You may also visit www.dwc.org, under “Accountability,” and utilize any of the mechanisms listed for reporting, including EthicsPoint, a third-party reporting system that accepts reports via internet or phone. You may report anonymously to EthicsPoint if you prefer.

The Three Components of Compliance

The Safe Environment Program by the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston consists of the following three components:

- ✓ Background Check
- ✓ Policy Relating to Sexual Abuse of Children and acknowledgement of documents
- ✓ Awareness training for adults (VIRTUS online or live training)

All three components are mandated by the diocese for persons seeking employment or seeking to volunteer directly or indirectly with children. A person is considered in compliance with the

Diocese’s Safe Environment Policy upon successful completion of all three components. Every year, the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston - as well as all other dioceses in the United States - is audited by the USCCB for compliance with its “*Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.” The Diocese also convenes a lay-led Review Board that meets regularly to review all Safe Environment matters and ensure adherence to the Safe Environment process, including reporting to civil authorities.



Teaching Safety for Children

A Student Awareness Program has been implemented since the fall of 2005 to give children information (appropriate for their age levels) and skills to help recognize acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and how to effectively deal with those behaviors. This is a VIRTUS program called “**Teaching Safety.**” The program is taught in Catholic schools and as part of Parish Schools of Religion. This program offers lesson plans for children in grades Kindergarten through 12.

The “Teaching Safety” lesson cycle for this year is:

School Year **2022-23 ... Lesson FIVE and Lesson SIX ...** Lesson Five should have been taught by the end of October 2022. Lesson Six should be taught by the end of the school year. Many of our schools have already taught both lessons together. If your parish school of religion or your Catholic school has not taught the lessons yet, please proceed with completion and documentation as soon as possible. All parents/guardians are welcome to view the lessons being taught in advance. And all parent/guardians who opt out of the lessons for their children are welcome to take copies of the lessons and teach them at home. If you are a parent or guardian, please contact your parish or school if you would like to see the lessons in advance of being taught or if you would like to opt out your child and teach the lessons at home yourself.

Advice Offered on Technology-Related Communication Between Adults, Students

By Robert Hugh Farley, M.S.

This article is the copyrighted property of National Catholic Services, LLC (National Catholic), all rights reserved, and is republished here with National Catholic's permission. It originally appeared on the VIRTUS Online™ website as continuing training for adults at www.virtus.org. For more information about VIRTUS Online or other VIRTUS® products and services, please call 1-888-847-8870 or email helpdesk@virtus.org.



The information given in this article contains the thoughts and opinions of its author. It is not intended to serve as a model of diocesan policy or procedure regarding communication between adults and students. We encourage all readers to investigate and follow the policies and guidelines set by your diocese.

Recently, there have been increasing requests for information regarding guidelines for smart and safe social networking, instant messaging, texting, and phone interactions between caring adults (volunteers, clergy, etc.)

and young people. In other words, expanded applications for what could be referred to as “healthy boundaries.” Just yesterday, before I began a presentation at a school district institute day in southern Illinois, the superintendent asked about the implementation of guidelines for technology-related contact between staff members and students. Apparently, developing guidelines for technology related communication between adults and students is a hot topic!

Today, many teachers provide students with their personal email addresses, and/or other social networking information so students can effectively communicate with them. There is justifiable cause for concern when a student has such unfettered access to their teachers' "private" behavior. School administrators worry, among other issues, whether the personal details on a teacher's personal social networking page will upset or confuse both a student and their parents.

In my work throughout the United States, I have found that the kneejerk reaction on this issue for a school district or a religious entity is often a complete disconnect by prohibiting any type of electronic communication between adults and young people. In fact, a new state law necessitates all Louisiana school districts to implement policies requiring documentation of all electronic interactions that occur between teachers and students through a non-school-issued device, such as a personal cell phone or email account. Louisiana parents also have the option of forbidding any communication between teachers and their child through personal electronic devices.

As a former Catholic high school history teacher and a parent, I find this notion troubling because it can stifle communication between adults and today's technology-motivated child. In fact, on a personal note I have found that my own three children respond more frequently to text messages rather than the telephone calls I make to their cell phones.

The key is to find the proper balance between staying connected to young people, while at the same time remaining professional. So what is one to do?

Many school districts today provide students, parents, and staff with copies of their Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) related to Internet safety, sexual harassment, bullying, and the use of their technology resources. The AUP often provides guidelines for the teacher supervision of student computer use, parental consent for student Internet use, and specific auditing procedures to determine whether education technology is being used for the purpose of accessing sexually explicit or other types of objectionable material. In addition, several AUPs prohibit unprofessional social relationships with minors.

Today, social networking sites and other means are frequently used as an easy way to communicate between friends. It is important for teachers and caring adults to remember to always keep these methods of communication professional when using them with students or young people or when it is possible that students can access them. This helps avoid potential problems that might arise when boundaries are blurred between a teacher and a young person.



This helps avoid potential problems that might arise when boundaries are blurred between a teacher and a young person.

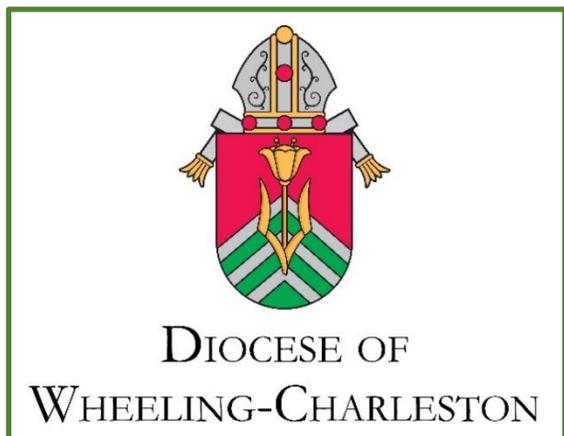
A teacher or adult must keep the language in posts and other electronic communication formal and always think before sending or posting. This should involve re-reading the language to make sure it cannot be mistaken for being suggestive or inappropriate. An effective technique to maintain professionalism between students and teachers is to confine topics conveyed via electronic communication to school activities, class topics, or information that may clarify an assignment. Adults should never use electronic communication to gossip or discuss personal issues with young people.

In order to address the issue of electronic communication between adults and young people, a school district or other entity should implement specific guidelines. These guidelines, including the consequences of misuse, should apply to faculty, staff, other adults, and students equally.

It is not the intent of the guidelines to interfere with private communications between individuals—nor is it the intent of the guidelines to deny access to recognized student organizations that wish to announce upcoming events that may be of interest to members of the school or community. The goal is to provide guidance on how and where boundaries should be drawn with regard to technology related communication between adults and young people.

Everyone is aware of the rapid advances occurring in electronic communication and technology. As a result the Technology Contact between Adults and Students Policy must be updated or modified as soon as changes occur. Being proactive and distributing the policy to students, parents, and adults may go a long way in preventing confrontations as well as possible litigation. In-service training covering these and other electronic communication issues should be a part of on-going professional development as well as being mandatory for new-teacher or new-employee orientation sessions.

Here are some specific guidelines for technology and online learning from the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston's policy:



General Guidelines:

Do not provide minors with alcoholic beverages, tobacco, pornography, drugs, or anything that is prohibited by law.

Topics, vocabulary, recordings, films, games, the use of computer software, social media, or any other form of personal interaction or entertainment that could not be used comfortably in the presence of parents should not be employed with minors. Sexually explicit or pornographic material is never appropriate. This includes sexually explicit material or pornography of an adult nature as well as child pornography. The production and/or distribution of child pornography is a felony.

If one-on-one pastoral care of a minor should be necessary, avoid meeting in isolated environments. Schedule meetings at times and use locations that create accountability. Limit both the length and number of sessions and make appropriate referrals. Notify parents of the meetings.

Electronic communications with minors should be limited in nature and scope. They should be informative and pertain to church or school-related activities and issues only. Every effort should be made to utilize applications for communication whereby parents or guardians may be included on messaging. Minors should not have administrative access to social media or electronic communication accounts for any parish or school.

Do not take photographs of minors while they are unclothed or dressing (e.g. in a locker room or bathing facility).

Guidelines for Online/Remote Learning:

These guidelines apply to the use of online/electronic platforms to safely and effectively facilitate communication and learning via video or audio conferencing as opposed to being physically present in a parish or other facility/structure.

Although most learning throughout the Diocese is accomplished in a parish or school setting, the Diocese recognizes that occasions may arise when it is appropriate and helpful to offer learning via other means, including online/electronic.

These guidelines exist to foster a Safe Environment when utilizing online/electronic means of learning.

For parishes and programs that wish to provide online learning for minors in parish school of religion classes, confirmation classes, Teaching Safety classes, youth groups, or other parish-related subject matter, the following guidelines are required:

The adults overseeing the activity must be compliant with Safe Environment to include: completion of awareness training, background check, and policy form.

There must be at least two Safe Environment-compliant adults present on each group video/call.

Parents must give consent for their children to participate in a group video/call. Consent may be obtained via email, text, or form. Documentation of consent must be kept on file with other Safe Environment documentation.

Parents must be informed in advance of the day, date, and time of a group video/call as well as a summary of the nature and subject matter of the video/call. This may be accomplished via email, text, or form. Documentation must be kept on file with other Safe Environment documentation.



Videos/calls should be scheduled during reasonable hours/timeframes. Do not schedule videos/calls late at night or very early in the morning.

Parents are always welcome to listen along with their children in a group video/call if they choose.

The platform selected for the video/call must be safe, reputable, and user-friendly.

All participants on a video must be appropriately attired, just like participating in an activity in a public setting.

Each group video/call should begin with a statement that appropriate conduct/behavioral norms do apply, just like a classroom/parish/public setting.

Parishes must be mindful of families who do not have the capability to connect via online/electronic methods and must make information available via hard-copy, if applicable. (For example, a PSR lesson or a Teaching Safety lesson)

A graphic for National Child Abuse Prevention Month. On the left, a dark blue curved banner contains the text: "APRIL IS National Child Abuse Prevention Month #ThrivingFamilies". At the bottom of the banner are logos for "Children's Bureau" and "Child Welfare Information Gateway". To the right, a light blue background with falling raindrops features a central illustration of a family (mother, father, and child) under a blue umbrella. Above the umbrella, the text "Risk Factors" is listed: "Parental stress", "Substance misuse", and "Poverty". Below the umbrella, the text "Protective Factors" is listed: "Parental resilience", "Nurturing and attachment", "Knowledge of parenting and child development", "Concrete support in times of need", "Social connections", and "Social-emotional competence of children".