



**SUBMISSION OF THE
VICTORIAN INDEPENDENT
EDUCATION UNION**

**TO THE VICTORIAN INSTITUTE OF
TEACHING
*DRAFT CODE OF ETHICS FOR
VICTORIAN TEACHERS***

May 2005

1.0 General Comments

- 1.1 The Victorian Independent Education Union welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission in respect to the draft Code of Ethics for Victorian teachers.
- 1.2 VIEU recognises that the development of a code of ethics is an important step in increasing the professional status of teachers. Having said this, VIEU does not accept that teachers do not currently have a strong ethical framework in which they operate. Teachers do have a strong moral and ethical understanding of their work, and a code of ethics should aim to articulate these existing values and ethics, not build on or add to them.
- 1.3 The ethical framework in which teachers operate is a complex one; in fact the complexity of professional decision making, often with an ethical or values component, is one of the key characteristics of teaching.
- 1.4 VIEU also recognises that the Code of Ethics will form the basis of a future Code of Conduct. As the Code of Conduct will be more prescriptive in nature it is likely to have a greater impact on explicitly setting standards of conduct for teachers. Because of this, VIEU believes it is essential that the Code of Ethics is an expression of values that are commonly understood and not subject to widely varying interpretations. VIEU believes that the Code can only operate effectively if there is an agreed understanding of the key terms enunciated in the code.
- 1.5 VIEU also believes that the Code of Ethics should reflect the unique nature of teaching as profession and articulate those values that are unique to the teaching profession.

2.0 Overview

- 2.1 The overall framework of the code is supported, as are the three underpinning values of integrity, respect and responsibility.
- 2.2 VIEU believes that some of the terms that have been included in the draft code should not be supported for one or more of the following reasons:
 - 2.2.1 They are too value-laden and consequently subject to too wide a range of interpretations to be of any value
 - 2.2.2 They are of minor importance to warrant inclusion in a code

2.2.3 They are not reflective of current understandings of the ethical framework of the profession

3.0 Opening Statement

- 3.1 This statement is supported in general. VIEU believes it would be enhanced if the statement read "Teachers ***use their expert knowledge*** to provide experiences" This would explicitly acknowledge that there is a body of knowledge, research, practice, etc that informs how teachers engage in their teaching and learning – one of the key features of the profession.

4.0 Statement and Indicators Regarding Professional Integrity

- 4.1 VIEU supports the notion that teachers should act in the public interest, but again believes that greater clarity needs to be provided as to what this actually means. Without clarity, this could be used against individual teachers. For example, would this obligation to act in the public interest override a teacher's contractual obligations to be loyal to their employer? Similarly, would this undermine the legitimate rights of teachers to take lawful industrial action?
- 4.2 VIEU rejects the inclusion of dignity in the third dot point. It is value laden, unnecessary, meaningless and difficult to define. For example a primary teacher sitting on the floor acting like a spider would be considered appropriate but it may be considered "undignified" if a VCE teacher were to do so!

Even if it were possible to arrive at a clearly understood meaning of "dignity in the context of a code of ethics, VIEU is not aware of dignity being used in any other Code of Ethics. VIEU believes, therefore, that its inclusion would be warranted only on the basis that this was a unique and defining ethic or value to teaching. There has been no case put to this effect.

5.0 Statement and Indicators for Respect

- 5.1 As previously stated, VIEU believes that the code should reflect the unique nature of teaching as profession and articulate values that are unique to the teaching profession. VIEU believes that a central value for teachers is that of ***collegiality*** and as such should be explicitly stated in this section. Unlike other professions, teachers are required to work closely in collaboration with colleagues; you cannot work in isolation, you must work with colleagues to develop students, plan curriculum,

and develop school policies. The entire endeavour is a collegial one and as such this should be explicitly stated as a core value.

VIEU suggests that the opening statement should read
“Teachers act with collegiality, care and compassion”

- 5.2 VIEU again rejects the inclusion of both dignity and courtesy in a statement of core ethics/value. The inclusion of respect, care and compassion implies that teachers will act in a courteous and dignified manner and VIEU believes that their inclusion is unnecessary, unclear and more reminiscent of the school rules than a statement underpinning values and ethics for an entire profession.
- 5.3 VIEU believes that the second dot point should be changed to read that “ teachers demonstrate respect by treating those with whom they work fairly and reasonably”. These terms have an understood meaning at law and actually go to how teachers should treat those they work with, whereas the term “equitably” only implies that teachers should treat people in the same manner ie they can treat people badly providing they treat everyone badly.
- 5.4 The statement regarding confidentiality is problematic. We assume that this refers to information regarding students and families. If this is the case this should be explicitly articulated. The current statement is too broad to be of use and could discourage or limit teachers from participating in research, presenting at conferences, writing articles, etc, for example.

Of more concern, however, is that this is not an accurate statement of the work of teachers. Teachers are constantly required to share information they obtain about students and families in order to provide education and/or meet pastoral care or welfare needs. To state that teachers should not share information obtained could create confusion and uncertainty.

VIEU believe that the key ethic/value that should be enunciated here should reflect the fact that teachers do make professional judgments around the sharing of information. The code should reflect the value base teachers are guided by in making these decisions as professionals.

6.0 Statement and Indicators for Responsibility

- 6.0 VIEU supports this section of the code.