



Understanding the role of Board members in employment matters / investigations

SCSBA SCHOOL LAW CONFERENCE

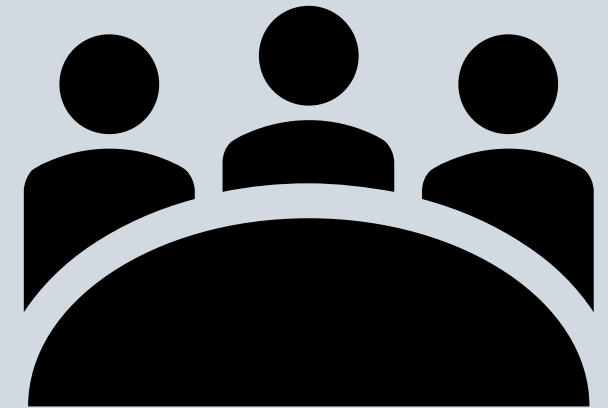
AUGUST 23, 2025

KATHY MAHONEY

VERNIE WILLIAMS

School Board

- ❖ There are numerous employment matters that may come before the Board pursuant to Board policies. For this reason, Board members should limit their discussion of employment matters in order to preserve their impartiality on any such matters in the event they come before the Board.
- ❖ Examples of policies which might result in employment matters coming before the Board include:
 - Grievance policies
 - Certified employee non-renewals or terminations
 - Classified employee terminations
- ❖ If any information is provided to a Board member regarding concerns with an employee, the Board member should immediately refer it to the Superintendent for investigation and action, as appropriate.





Contract Levels and Rights of Teachers

❖ Induction Contract Teachers

- Minimal due process rights of a pre-termination hearing with the administration with notice of concerns, sharing of evidence regarding the concerns, and an opportunity to tell his/her side of the story.

Contract Levels and Rights of Teachers

❖ Annual Contract Teachers

- **S.C. Code Ann. § 59-26-40**

...Teachers working under a one-year annual contract who are not recommended for reemployment at the end of the year, within fifteen days after receipt of notice of the recommendation, may request an informal hearing before the district superintendent ... At the hearing the evidence must be reviewed by the superintendent. The teacher may provide information, testimony, or witnesses that the teacher considers necessary ... The teacher may appeal the superintendent's decision to the school district board of trustees.

...The board of trustees shall review all the materials presented at the earlier hearing, and after examining these materials, the board may or may not grant the request for a board hearing of the matter.

Contract Levels and Rights of Teachers

❖ Continuing Contract Teachers

- South Carolina Employment and Dismissal Act provisions apply.

❖ Teacher Misconduct Issues

- **S.C. Code Ann. § 59-25-430.** Dismissal of teachers; grounds; opportunity for hearing; suspension pending resolution of charges.

Any teacher may be dismissed at any time who shall fail, or who may be incompetent, to give instruction in accordance with the directions of the superintendent, or who shall otherwise manifest an evident unfitness for teaching; provided, however, that notice and an opportunity shall be afforded for a hearing prior to any dismissal. Evident unfitness for teaching is manifested by conduct such as, but not limited to, the following: persistent neglect of duty, willful violation of rules and regulations of district board of trustees, drunkenness, conviction of a violation of the law of this State or the United States, gross immorality, dishonesty, illegal use, sale or possession of drugs or narcotics....

Contract Levels and Rights of Teachers

❖ Continuing Contract Teachers

❖ Performance Concerns

- **S.C. Code Ann. § 59-25-440.** Written notice to teacher of possible dismissal; school administrator required to make reasonable effort to assist teacher in corrective measures; reasonable time for improvement required.

Whenever a superior, principal, where applicable, or supervisor charged with the supervision of a teacher finds it necessary to admonish a teacher for a reason that he believes may lead to, or be cited as a reason for, dismissal or cause the teacher not to be reemployed he shall: (1) *bring the matter in writing to the attention of the teacher involved and make a reasonable effort to assist the teacher to correct whatever appears to be the cause of potential dismissal or failure to be reemployed and, (2) except as provided in Section 59-25-450, allow reasonable time for improvement.* (emphasis added)



Contract Levels and Rights of Teachers

❖ Continuing Contract Teachers

❖ Hearing Rights

- **S.C. Code Ann. § 59-25-470.**

- A. Within fifteen days after receipt of notice of suspension or dismissal, a teacher may serve upon the chairman of the board or the superintendent a written request for a hearing before the board, or its designee. ...
- C. The hearing must be held by the board, or its designee, within forty-five days after the request is served. ...
- D. The teacher may be present with counsel at the hearing, and may cross-examine witnesses, may offer evidence and witnesses, and present defenses to the charges. The board, or its designee, shall order the appearance of any witness requested by the teacher, subject to the limitations of Section 59-25-460. The superintendent shall initiate the introduction of evidence in substantiation of the charges.

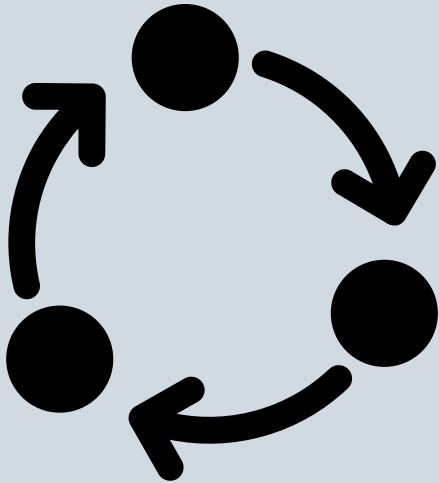
Contract Levels and Rights of Teachers

❖ Continuing Contract Teachers

❖ Hearing Process

- S.C. Code Ann. § 59-25-460.

(A) A teacher may not be dismissed unless written notice specifying the cause of dismissal first is given to the teacher by the superintendent and the teacher is given an opportunity for an evidentiary hearing.... This written notice must include the fact that a hearing before the board or its designee is available to the teacher upon request if the request is made in writing within fifteen days as provided in Section 59-25-470. Any such hearing must be public unless the teacher requests in writing that it be private. A board that chooses to delegate the evidentiary hearing to one or more designees, as provided in this section, shall indicate in board policy that it engages in this practice. The hearing process becomes effective when the board adopts the policy, and must be communicated to all affected employees within fifteen days. A subsequent change only may be made pursuant to the board policy revision process.



Contract Levels and Rights of Teachers

❖ Continuing Contract Teachers

❖ Hearing Process

- **S.C. Code Ann. § 59-25-460.**

... (2) If the designee holds the evidentiary hearing, he shall issue a written report and recommendation containing findings of facts and conclusions of law to the board, superintendent, and teacher within fifteen days after the hearing concludes. The superintendent and the teacher may submit a written response to this report and recommendation to the board within ten days after the date on which the report and recommendation are issued, after which the board shall issue a decision affirming or withdrawing the notice of suspension or dismissal within thirty days. In the interim, the board may conduct a hearing on the order to consider any written responses from the superintendent and teacher, but this hearing may not operate to extend the thirty day limit in which the board shall issue its decision affirming or withdrawing the notice of suspension or dismissal. The board retains final decision making authority regarding the teacher dismissal or suspension recommendation based on its consideration of the record, the report and recommendation, and any written submission of the superintendent and teacher.

Contract Levels and Rights of Teachers

❖ Continuing Contract Teachers

❖ Hearing Process

- **S.C. Code Ann. § 59-25-460.**

... (C) If the board holds the evidentiary hearing, the board shall issue its decision within the thirty days after the hearing. This decision must be in writing and must include findings of facts and conclusions of law.

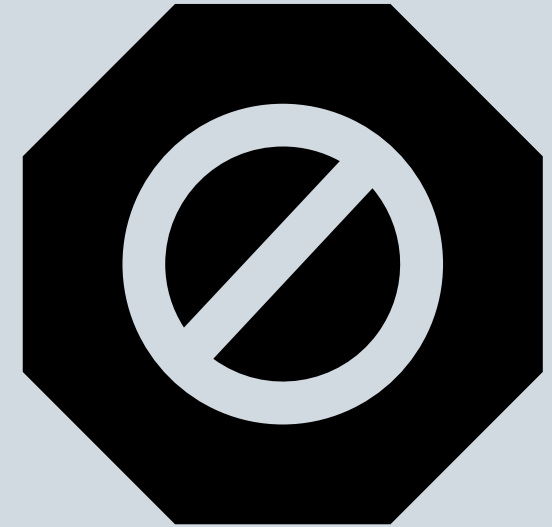
(D) The board shall determine if the evidence shows good and just cause for the notice of suspension or dismissal, and accordingly shall render a decision to affirm or withdraw the notice of suspension or dismissal ...

S.C. Code § 59-25-480

- ❖ The decision of the District Board of Trustees can be appealed to circuit court.
- ❖ The scope of review that applies to cases brought under the Teacher Employment and Dismissal Act is limited to whether the grounds given for termination of employment are supported by substantial evidence. *Laws v. Richland County School District No. 1*, 270 S.C. 492, 243 S.E. 2d at 192 (1978).
- ❖ “Substantial evidence is not a mere scintilla of evidence, nor the evidence viewed blindly from one side of the case, but is evidence which, considering the record as a whole, would allow reasonable minds to reach the conclusion the administrative agency must have reached in order to justify its action.” *Id* 243 S.E. 2d at 193.

Mandatory reporting of certain certified employee separations to the State Department of Education

- ❖ Even if a certified employee resigns from his/her employment with the District, in certain cases the Superintendent may be required to report the resignation to the State Board if the resignation followed allegations of misconduct described in the Regulation below.
- ❖ Report to Department of Education (as appropriate) pursuant to State Board Regulation R. 43-58.1
 - A district superintendent, on behalf of the local board of education, shall report to the Chair of the State Board of Education and the State Superintendent of Education, the name and certificate number of any certified educator who is **dismissed, resigns, or is otherwise separated from employment** with that district based on allegations of misconduct... that is reasonably believed by the district superintendent to constitute grounds for revocation or suspension of the certificate issued to the educator by the State Board...
(emphasis added)



Classified Employee Rights

- ❖ Follow Board Policy on Discipline, Suspension and Dismissal of Support Staff
- ❖ Support staff are generally considered “at-will” employees.
- ❖ Minimal due process rights of a pre-termination hearing with the administration with notice of concerns, sharing of evidence regarding the concerns, and an opportunity to tell his/her side of the story.



Use E-mails Cautiously – they could impact the due process rights of employees

- ❖ Public records maintained by the District are subject to release under the South Carolina Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”)
- ❖ Exceptions to the release of e-mails under FOIA include such things as:
 - “educational records” protected under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (“FERPA”)
 - Documents subject to attorney/client privilege
 - Documents including information of a personal nature where the public disclosure thereof would constitute unreasonable invasion of personal privacy
- ❖ May be subject to disclosure:
 - Pursuant to a subpoena (required disclosure)
 - Upon request of a parent for their child’s educational records under FERPA
 - Upon request of an attorney representing an employee in a termination proceeding

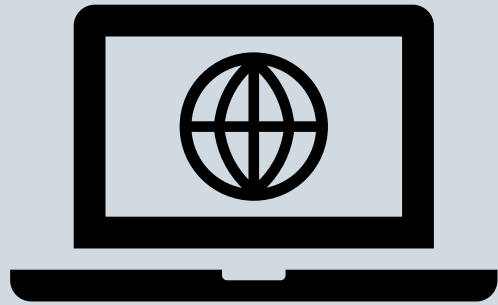
Examples of certain types of employee misconduct



Employee arrests

Employee Arrests

- ❖ Ensure Board policies require employees to notify the District immediately of any arrests.
- ❖ Employees are often placed on administrative leave based on the facts and circumstances that resulted in the arrest, so the matter may be addressed regardless of the outcome of the criminal charge.
- ❖ **Classified Employees**
 - Generally, Board policies provide that the District may place on administrative leave, with or without pay, a support staff employee who has criminal charges filed against him/her. The District generally investigates the actions which led to the employee's arrest and takes further disciplinary action against the employee, up to and including termination, regardless of the resolution of the criminal charges.
- ❖ **Certified employees**
 - Generally, certified employees are placed on administrative leave, with pay, based on S.C. Code § 59-25-430:
...
Notwithstanding the provisions of Section 59-25-450, when any teacher is charged with a violation of the law of this State or the United States which upon conviction may lead to, or be cited as a reason for, dismissal, such teacher may be suspended pending resolution of the charges and receive his usual compensation during the suspension period, such compensation not to exceed the term of his teaching contract. If the teacher is convicted, including pleading guilty or nolo contendere to the charges, he may then be subject to dismissal proceedings. If no conviction results, his suspension shall be terminated.



Employee misconduct
through speech,
including social media

Employee Expression / Social Media Use

- ❖ *Pickering v. Board of Education*, 391 U.S. 563 (1968) U.S. Supreme Court
- ❖ A teacher was terminated for sending a letter to a local newspaper in connection with recently proposed tax increases and criticizing the Board.
- ❖ The court stated “because of the enormous variety of fact situations in which critical statements by teachers and other public employees may be thought by their superiors, against whom the statements are directed to furnish grounds for dismissal, we do not deem it either appropriate or feasible to attempt to lay down a general standard against which all such statements may be judged. However, in the course of evaluating the conflicting claims of First Amendment protection and the need for orderly school administration in the context of this case, we shall indicate some of the general lines along which an analysis of the controlling interest should run.”
 - ❖ The court found the statements in Pickering’s letter consisted essentially of criticism of the board’s allocation of school funds between educational and athletic programs and were in no way directed towards any person with whom Pickering would normally be in contact in the course of his daily work as a teacher. Thus, no question of maintaining either discipline by immediate superiors or harmony among coworkers was presented.
 - ❖ The court concluded that the teacher’s statements were critical of his ultimate employer, “but which are neither shown nor can be presumed to have in any way either impeded the teacher’s proper performance of his daily duties in the classroom or to have interfered with the regular operation of the schools generally.”

Fourth Circuit Cases on Employee Social Media Use

- ❖ *Grutzmacher v. Howard County*, 851 F.3d 332 (4th Cir. 2017)
- ❖ The Fourth Circuit addressed the use of social media by employees of a fire department. In its decision, the Court noted in a footnote the following:
 - We observe that the act of “liking” a Facebook post makes the post attributable to the “liker,” even if he or she did not author the original post. See *Bland v. Roberts*, 730 F.3d 368, 386 (4th Cir. 2013), as amended (Sept. 23, 2013) (“Clicking on the ‘like’ button literally causes to be published the statement that the User ‘likes’ something, which is itself a substantive statement... that a user may use a single mouse click to produce that message... instead of typing the same message several individual key strokes is of no constitutional significance.”)
- ❖ Accordingly, for ease of reference, we refer to Plaintiff’s various Facebook posts, comment replies, and “likes,” collectively, as Plaintiff’s “Facebook activity” or “speech.”

Fourth Circuit Cases on Employee Social Media Use

- ❖ The Plaintiff was a Battalion Chief with the Howard County Department of Fire and Rescue Services who posted comments that advocated violence to certain classes of people and “liked” comments that could be interpreted as supporting racism or bias.
- ❖ The court determined that some of Plaintiff’s Facebook activity implicated matters of public concern so it had to determine whether Plaintiff’s interests in speaking on a matter of public concern outweighed the department’s interest in providing effective and efficient services to the public.
- ❖ The court found the department’s interests in workplace efficiency and preventing disruption outweighed the commentary contained in Plaintiff’s Facebook activity, and noted:
 - Plaintiff’s Facebook activity interfered with and impaired department operations and discipline as well as working relationships within the department.
 - Plaintiff’s speech frustrated the department’s public safety mission and threatened “community trust” in the department, which is vitally important to its function.

Fourth Circuit Cases on Employee Social Media Use

- ❖ *Misjuns v. City of Lynchburg*, ___ F 4th ___, 2025 WL 1584229 (4th Cir. June 5, 2025)
- ❖ On June 5, 2025, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the federal district court's dismissal of a case brought by Misjuns, a fire department employee, against the City of Lynchburg alleging, among other things, violations of his First Amendment speech, after he was terminated for making offensive social media posts attacking transgender individuals. The Plaintiff was employed as the fire captain.
- ❖ He had posted four cartoons on his public figure Facebook page with the caption, "#BidenErasedWomen – coming to your daughter's high school locker room in the near future." The cartoons depicted offensive stereotypes of transgender women in bathrooms and participating in sports. Citizens saw the posts and made numerous complaints to the city.

Fourth Circuit Cases on Employee Social Media Use

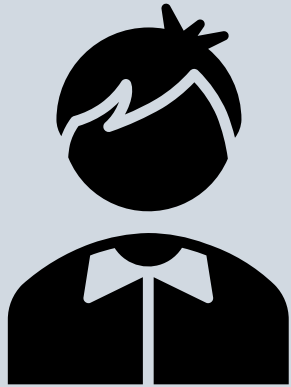
- ❖ The Court upheld the dismissal of the case, finding that the Plaintiff had failed to allege liability in numerous ways, including by claiming a city “policy or practice” of shutting down speech. Plaintiff had only alleged facts showing that officials had told him his comments did not reflect the kind of culture they wanted to have or support. The Court found that the comments did not show a policy or custom of terminating employees with whose speech the city disagreed.

Fourth Circuit Cases on Employee Social Media Use

- ❖ In a concurring opinion, Judge Wilkinson stated, “The Plaintiff has every right to express his views, hateful though they be. But he has no right to impair the fire department’s work and efficiency. His transparently bigoted remarks gave rise to a reasonable apprehension on the part of Lynchburg’s citizens that the fire department’s emergency-response tasks would not be carried out in an even handed and unbiased way.”

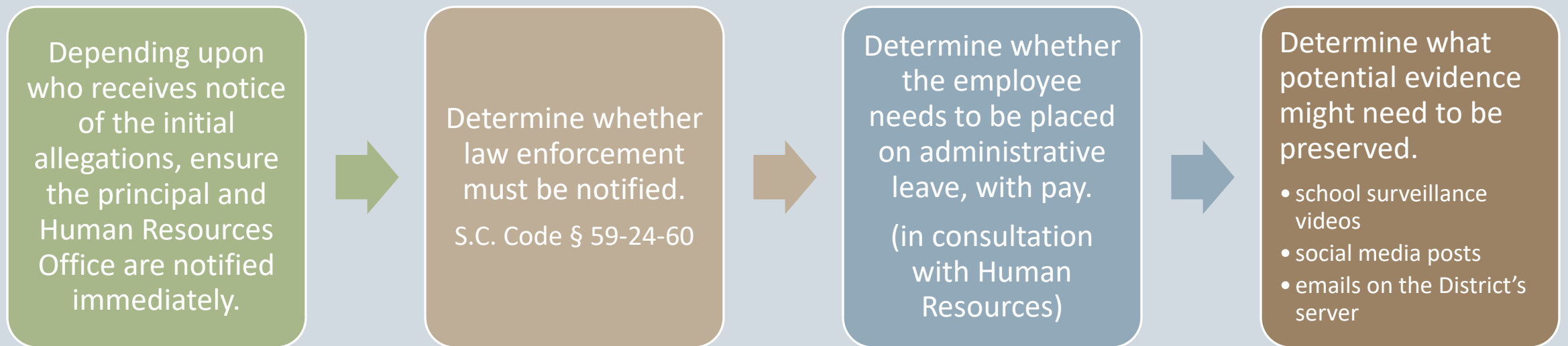
Staff Conduct Policy

- ❖ Review and update the Board's Staff Conduct policy, as needed, to address all employee conduct, including social media issues.
- ❖ Avoid policy language that could be found to be unconstitutionally overbroad.
- ❖ Recommend including language such as:
 - The personal life of an employee, including the employee's personal use of District issued and non-District issued electronic equipment, inside and outside of working hours (such as through social networking sites, social media and personal portrayal on the internet), will be the concern of and warrant the attention of the Board if it impairs the employee's ability to effectively perform his/her job responsibilities or if it violates local, State or federal law, or contractual agreements. Employee social media use has the potential to result in disruption of the school/work environment or impair the efficiency of the school/workplace. As such, the Board expects employees to ensure all their conduct and communications, including those associated with their social media, do not disrupt the school/work environment, or impair the efficiency of the school/workplace. Employees will be held to the same professional standards in their use of social media as they are for any other public conduct. Unprofessional conduct may subject the employee to disciplinary actions consistent with State law, federal law, and/or Board policy.



Employee misconduct towards students

Initial steps the administration will take upon learning of allegations of employee misconduct





Margarita Jones (2nd Grade Teacher)

@iluv2teach



I just got my student class roster for this year... none of my students can even read 😞 I bet their parents can't read either 😏 Gonna be a great year 🤔🤔

12:32 PM · Aug 2, 2024

15 Retweets

7 Quote Tweets

48 Likes



Scenario



Chad Enough (US History Teacher)

@1stamendment4ever



Watching the school board meeting... and this is why you shouldn't let the clowns run the circus!! 🙄🤡

7:05 PM · Aug 5, 2024

36 Retweets

8 Quote Tweets

89 Likes



Scenario