

BACK TO SCHOOL BASICS

By Jim Haviland, WVEA Help Center Member Advocacy Specialist

It's the beginning of the new school year. New faces fill the hallways. New lessons are taught. New standards and expectations are shared. Possibilities are endless. Although you may not have any pressing concerns about nonrenewals, terminations or other employment-related issues, now is the perfect time to consider these guidelines in order to avoid potential problems during the year:

- **Maintain your boundaries with students.** Unfortunately, far too many educators and school employees forget their roles. Remember that you are in a position of trust. Do not do or say anything to a student that you would not do or say in front of their parents. Failure to maintain appropriate relationships with students could result in job action and/or discipline against your license, certificate or permit.
- **Be aware of how and when you communicate with students.** The use of new technologies presents certain challenges. Email and text messages allow quicker, in some cases, immediate access to educators. Immediate access is not always better. It is difficult to defend a questionable communication that occurred at midnight on a Saturday. Email and text messages can be tracked and used as evidence in disciplinary hearings by your employer or the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE). In addition, resist the temptation to be less formal via email and/or text message. These messages can easily be taken out of context and manipulated.
- **Know your grievance timelines.** The WVEA Website outlines the process to be used to address violations of the statute, including the timelines for filing a grievance and moving it through the grievance process. If you miss a timeline at any stage of the grievance process, you may have no remedy for the violation. Work with your local association leadership to address problems and access the grievance process. The WVEA Help Center is also available to assist you and your local association.
- **Read and understand the Employee Code of Conduct (WVBE Policy 5902).** Violations of this policy can result in disciplinary actions or dismissal. The WVBE has the authority to take action against a person's license, certificate or permit. If you are accused of professional misconduct, you have all due process rights guaranteed by law. You can find a link to the policy from the WVEA Website.
- **Do not use the school's computer to access inappropriate websites or check personal email.** In most cases, the administration can track the time and frequency of Internet access. Know your WVBE/county computer use policy. You may have been asked to read and sign it. Violating the policy may also be grounds for discipline, up to and including termination.
- **Request representation when called into a meeting with your supervisor that may result in discipline.** Do not waive this right even if you believe you have done nothing wrong. The association representative will be a witness to the meeting and will be able to assist you in determining the appropriate next steps, which may include filing a grievance or accessing legal services.
- **Make sure all necessary employment requirements are in order.** When does your license expire? Are you on track for the completion of any renewal requirements? Have you completed any necessary background check? Failure to complete these requirements could result in job loss or employment action. A district cannot pay an individual who is not licensed.

Although nothing can guarantee that you will never find yourself in a difficult employment situation, these general guidelines should help minimize your risks. If you have questions about your contract or a specific employment situation, contact the WVEA Help Center at 1.866.568.WVEA.