



When Personnel Issues Become Public

Recently you faced the difficult decision to issue a nonrenewal notice to a probationary teacher informing her she will not be rehired next year. Although there have been concerns since the fall from both peers and parents, this teacher is suddenly loved by all.

Almost immediately after the teacher received her release letter, you started getting requests from other teachers for a meeting. Several parents called to sing the teacher's praises. As you walk the hallways, you notice a number of veteran staff members giving you the proverbial "stink eye."

Recently a handful of children in the teacher's class began wearing buttons that say "Save Our Teacher." And today you've heard through the grapevine that a group of parents plans to attend tonight's school board meeting to give trustees and the superintendent a petition demanding that your decision be reversed. How should you respond?

Immediate problems:

- A confidential personnel issue is about to become a public issue. Although you acted in the best interest of students, your motives are being questioned and your ability to defend your actions is limited. The board meeting will make the problem worse. Unfortunately, you are not going to be able to respond to much of what will be said and asked.

Underlying issues:

- Reasons for termination, even of a probationary teacher, typically are not public. However, a variety of "assumed" reasons likely will be presented on behalf of the teacher. You likely will be accused of making the decision based on arbitrary reasons, including personal dislike for the teacher. Regardless of the amount of documentation and communication the teacher has had regarding any deficits in performance, she likely will claim ignorance and shock. For some teachers, this type of situation touches their own insecurity and leads them to defend a colleague even without full knowledge of the situation.
- Confidentiality issues will prevent you from helping others understand the wisdom of the nonrenewal. There is a natural tendency for peers to gather round the "victim."

How to Proceed:

- Discuss the situation with the superintendent immediately and ask for guidance on handling the situation. It will be imperative that you and central office officials are responding in a similar manner. The superintendent will decide whether legal advice is recommended.
- The children wearing the buttons in the classroom must be addressed also. Ask the superintendent for advice; confer with peers to prepare to speak with the children and possibly their parents individually. When parents call, thank them for their concern and remind them politely that you are unable to discuss personnel issues.

- A good place to start is organization of documentation regarding the teacher's performance and steps taken to remediate the situation. The superintendent and Human Resources department will need this information if they do not already have it.
- Also, verify that all contractual and legal requirements have been satisfied relative to the nonrenewal procedure.
- Now is also a good time to remind yourself that a decision to terminate early benefits students in years to come. The probationary period is actually an extension of the hiring process. Your action is the final phase of the process, and you have decided not to make the hire. Hang on and stay centered.

Other information that might be helpful:

- Are the students who are wearing the buttons connected to the parents who called?
- How did others learn about the situation—from the teacher herself, or from a breakdown in your communication process?
- Is the teacher encouraging the behavior you are seeing? If so, she should be reminded that, if she wants to continue with her career in education, a public airing of her termination may not be helpful. Potential future employers may see the current situation in a light that is very unfavorable to the teacher.

How to Avoid:

- Review the process for notification of nonrenewal status. Rethink the conversation with the teacher. Was there an opportunity to discuss the teacher's reaction to the nonrenewal and how she might interact with others related to the situation? Perhaps she would have benefited from a discussion of options available to her. Was the timing of the notice most opportune—both in terms of timing in the day/week and the school year? How might you have anticipated the reaction?
- If you are in a union state, close work with union representation as concerns surface and you work to resolve performance problems can often help avoid orchestrated advocacy in these situations. However, there is no sure-fire way to avoid these situations, particularly if the performance problem is not obvious to students and colleagues, and if the teacher is active and popular in other areas of the school.