The Law of Employment in North Carolina’s Public Schools

Robert P. Joyce
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Overview of Contents

Preface xiii
Using this Book xv

Introduction: Basic Concepts of School Employment Law 1

Part 1: Federal Law 17

Part 2: North Carolina Statutory and Common Law 65

Part 3: State Board of Education Regulations 153

Part 4: Local Board of Education Policies 233

Part 5: Employment in Specific Positions 327

Index of Cases Cited 479

Index of Attorney General’s Opinions 489

Index of Office of Administrative Hearings Cases 491

Subject Index 493
Contents

Preface xiii
Using this Book xv

Chapter 1 Introduction: Basic Concepts of School Employment Law 1
   Section 100 Three Distinctive Kinds of Employment in the Public Schools  4
   Section 101 Different Protections for the Different Kinds of Employees  8
   Section 102 Salary Schedules and Allotments  10
   Section 103 Special Transition Period for Principals, Supervisors, and Directors  11
   Section 104 Independent Contractors  14

Part 1: Federal Law

Chapter 2 Constitutional Considerations Affecting School Employment 19
   Section 200 The School Board as Part of the Government  22
   Section 201 Freedom of Speech  22
   Section 202 Protection of Property  26
   Section 203 Protection of Liberty  31
   Section 204 The Equal Protection of the Laws  32
   Section 205 Freedom from Unreasonable Searches  34

Chapter 3 Federal Statutes Affecting School Employment 39
   Section 300 Federal Statutes Prohibiting Discrimination on Account of Race and Sex  41
   Section 301 Statutes Prohibiting Discrimination on Account of National Origin, Color, and Religion  48
   Section 302 Statutes Prohibiting Discrimination on Account of Age  49
### Section 303 Statutes Prohibiting Discrimination on Account of Disability  
51

### Section 304 Federal Statutes Regarding Overtime Pay and Minimum Wage  
56

### Section 305 Family and Medical Leave Protections  
59

### Section 306 Federal Statutes Regarding Drugs in the Workplace  
60

### Section 307 Other Federal Statutes  
63

### Part 2: North Carolina Statutory and Common Law

#### Chapter 4  Personnel Provisions in Chapter 115C of the General Statutes  
67

- **Section 400 Statutes Setting Out the Authority of the State Board of Education**  
 69

- **Section 401 Statutes Setting Out the Authority of Local Boards of Education**  
 72

- **Section 402 School-Based Management and Accountability Program**  
 79

- **Section 403 G.S. Chapter 115C Provisions Governing Conditions of Employment**  
 86

- **Section 404 G.S. Chapter 115C Provisions for Appeals**  
 108

- **Section 405 Employment in Charter Schools**  
 108

#### Chapter 5  Other State Constitutional and Statutory Provisions Relating to Public School Employment  
113

- **Section 500 North Carolina Constitutional Provisions**  
 115

- **Section 501 Statutory Protections for Employees**  
 116

- **Section 502 Public Records Law**  
 120

- **Section 503 Open Meetings Act**  
 122

- **Section 504 Unemployment Compensation**  
 124

- **Section 505 Miscellaneous Protections against Dismissal**  
 125

- **Section 506 Defense of Teachers**  
 127

- **Section 507 Retirement**  
 127

- **Section 508 Disability Retirement**  
 128

- **Section 509 Health Coverage**  
 128

- **Section 510 Special Yearly Provisions in the State Budget Act**  
 129
Section 511 Employment References Protection 129

Chapter 6 North Carolina Employment Common Law 131
Section 600 Employment at Will 134
Section 601 Common Law Exception to Employment at Will 135
Section 602 Implied Contracts of Employment 138
Section 603 Employer Responsibility for Injuries Caused by an Employee 141
Section 604 Intentional Infliction of Emotional Distress 145
Section 605 Defamation 147

Part 3: State Board of Education Regulations

Chapter 7 State-Level Regulation of Public School Employment 155
Section 700 The Administrative Code 158
Section 701 State Board of Education Policy Manual 160
Section 702 Allotment Policy Manual 161
Section 703 Public School Personnel State Salary Schedule 163
Section 704 Policy Directives for School Administrators 168

Chapter 8 Substantive Policies of the State Board of Education: Licensure 171
Section 800 Licensure or Certification 174
Section 801 Who Must Be Licensed 174
Section 802 Initial, Continuing, and Provisional Licenses 178
Section 803 Out-of-Field Assignments, Provisional Licenses, and Endorsements 181
Section 804 Lateral Entry 182
Section 805 Testing Requirements 183
Section 806 Employment before Licensure 184
Section 807 Vocational Education 185
Section 808 Finance Officer and School Nurse Certification 185
Section 809 Licensure and Tenure 186
Section 810 License Suspension and Revocation 186
Chapter 9  

Substantive Policies of the State Board of Education: Performance Appraisal  

Section 900 Whose Performance Must Be Evaluated  

Section 901 The Elements of the Performance Evaluation System  

Section 902 Local Alternative Evaluations  

Section 903 Performance Appraisals and Action Plans  

Section 904 Challenging Performance Evaluation Results  

Chapter 10  

Substantive Policies of the State Board of Education: Leave and Substitute Teachers  

Section 1000 Vacation Leave  

Section 1001 Personal Leave  

Section 1002 Sick Leave  

Section 1003 Episodes of Violence  

Section 1004 Short-Term and Long-Term Disability  

Section 1005 Miscellaneous Leaves  

Section 1006 Holidays  

Section 1007 Employment of Substitutes  

Section 1008 Interim Employees  

Part 4: Local Board of Education Policies  

Chapter 11  

Employment Authority of the Local Board of Education  

Section 1100 Organization of the School Workplace  

Section 1101 Defense of Claims  

Section 1102 Solicitations  

Section 1103 Nepotism  

Section 1104 Residency Requirements  

Section 1105 Bloodborne Pathogens  

Chapter 12  

Local Board Policies: The Employment Process  

Section 1200 Delegation to the Superintendent  

Section 1201 Recruiting for and Filling Vacancies  

Section 1202 Criminal History Checks  

Section 1203 Drug Testing  

Section 1204 Health Certificates
Section 1704 Employment Connected to Low-Performing Schools 371

Chapter 18 The Scope of the Teacher Tenure Act 377
Section 1800 Basic Notions of Tenure 379
Section 1801 Who Is Covered by the Teacher Tenure Act 382
Section 1802 Probationary Teachers 389
Section 1803 Achieving and Losing Tenure 396

Chapter 19 Grounds for Dismissal under the Teacher Tenure Act 401
Section 1900 Dismissal Related to Job Performance Concerns 404
Section 1901 Dismissal Related to Conduct or Character Concerns 416
Section 1902 Dismissal Related to Concerns Regarding Physical or Mental Capacity 425
Section 1903 Dismissal Related to Concerns Regarding the Teacher’s License 427
Section 1904 Dismissal Related to Concerns about Citizenship 430
Section 1905 Dismissal in a Reduction in Force 431

Chapter 20 Procedures for Dismissal under the Teacher Tenure Act 433
Section 2000 Dismissal Contrasted with Nonrenewal 436
Section 2001 Dismissal Step One: Superintendent’s Decision and Notice to the Teacher 437
Section 2002 Dismissal Step Two: Teacher’s Response to the Superintendent’s Notice 440
Section 2003 Dismissal Step Three: Optional Case Manager Hearing 441
Section 2004 Dismissal Step Four: Hearing before the Local Board of Education 452
Section 2005 Dismissal Step Five: The Board’s Decision 458
Section 2006 Dismissal Step Six: Appeal by the Teacher and Review by the Courts 459
Section 2007 Hearings in a Reduction in Force 463
Section 2008 Dismissal by the State Board of Education 464

Chapter 21 **Suspensions under the Teacher Tenure Act** 469

- Section 2100 Suspension without Pay as Punishment 471
- Section 2101 Suspension with Pay in Anticipation of Dismissal 475
- Section 2102 Suspension without Pay in Anticipation of Dismissal 477

Index of Cases Cited 479

Index of Attorney General’s Opinions 489

Index of Office of Administrative Hearings Cases 491

Subject Index 493
Preface

The relationship between employer and employee is on its face quite simple. The employee does what the employer requires and the employer pays for that service. As personnel directors and administrators and lawyers who practice personnel law well know, the reality is much more complicated. From workers’ compensation to employment discrimination, freedom of speech to short-term disability, salary administration to unemployment compensation, defamation to due process, the sources of concern and potential liability are endless.

North Carolina’s school boards employ approximately 145,000 people. Just over half of them are categorized as teachers subject to the “System of Employment for Public School Teachers” (commonly referred to as the Teacher Tenure Act), a statute that sets out in remarkable detail a complex relationship between employer and employee. The other half are employed under two different legal arrangements, the fixed-term contracts of most administrators and the at-will status of classified employees. In a single county school system central office, the employment of one supervisor may be governed by the Teacher Tenure Act, the employment of a second person with the same title may be subject to the Administrator Term Contract Law, and a third supervisor may be employed at will.

Understanding fully the law of employment in North Carolina’s elementary and secondary public schools requires familiarity with Chapter 115C of the North Carolina General Statutes from the General Assembly; Title 16 of the North Carolina Administrative Code from the State Board of Education; the State Board of Education Policy Manual; and, from the Department of Public Instruction, the Guidelines for Public School Personnel Policies, the Employee Benefits Manual, the Allotment Policy Manual, the Financial Policy and Procedures Manual, the Class Specifications for Noncertified Public School Employees, the State Salary Schedule, and the Licensure Manual.

This law guide to employment in North Carolina’s public schools pulls all these sources of law into one reference book and to them adds the interpretations of state and federal law that the courts have offered over the years. It is designed to cover comprehensively the relationship between boards of education and their employees. It will not answer every question, but I hope it gives guidance in almost every area.
My thanks go to a number of knowledgeable individuals who have given me the benefit of their thoughts on topics covered by the book and, in many cases, their thoughts on the manuscript itself. My special thanks go to my colleague in school law at the Institute of Government, Laurie Mesibov, for her careful reading of the manuscript from cover to cover, and to Ingrid Johansen, a North Carolina lawyer now in Austin, Texas, whose insightful criticism led to improvements in almost every section of the book. Thanks also to the editorial and design folks at the Institute for making the manuscript a book.

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Using this Book

Each chapter in this book is divided into sections and each section has its own number. Chapter 18, for example, describing the scope of the Teacher Tenure Act, has four sections:

- Section 1800 Basic Notions of Tenure
- Section 1801 Who is Covered by the Teacher Tenure Act
- Section 1802 Probationary Teachers
- Section 1803 Achieving and Losing Tenure

Throughout the book there are cross references to discussions of related subjects using the section numbers. For example, in the discussion in section 1801 regarding probationary teachers, cross references direct the reader’s attention to section 804 and section 809 (both in chapter 8) for discussions of the relationship between tenure and licensure.