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## THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS

Midwest Principal's Center

November 2, 2015

### **I. Mandated Postings to School District Website**

- A. **School board member's leadership training:** Each school district must maintain on its Internet website the names of all voting members of the school board who have successfully completed the training required by Section 10-15a of the School Code. 105 ILCS 5/10-16a
- B. **School district report cards:** Each school district must post its School Report Card which describes the performance of its students by school attendance centers and by district and the district's financial resources and the use of financial resources. 105 ILCS 5/10-17a
- C. **Contracts over \$25,000 and collective bargaining agreements:** Each school district must post on its website annually all contracts over \$25,000 and any contract entered into with the exclusive bargaining representative. 105 ILCS 5/10-20.44(b)
- D. **Reports of ISBE submission on contracts:** Each year, in conjunction with the submission of the Statement of Affairs to the State Board of Education prior to December 1, provided for in Section 10-17 of the School Code, each school district must submit to ISBE an annual report on all contracts over \$25,000 awarded by the school district during the previous fiscal year. The report must include at least the following: (1) the total number of all contracts awarded by the school district; (2) the total value of all contracts awarded; (3) the number of contracts awarded to minority owned businesses, female owned businesses, and businesses owned by persons with disabilities, as defined in the Business Enterprise for Minorities, Females and Persons with Disabilities Act, and locally owned businesses; and (4) the total value of contracts awarded to minority owned businesses, female owned businesses, and businesses owned by persons with disabilities, as defined in the Business Enterprise for Minorities, Females and Persons with Disabilities Act, and locally owned businesses. The report must be made available to the public, including through publication on the school district's Internet website. 105 ILCS 5/10-20.44(c)

- E. **Administrator and teacher salary and benefits report:** Each school board must report to the Illinois State Board of Education, on or before October 1 of each year, the base salary and benefits of the district superintendent and all administrators and teachers employed by the school district. "Benefits" includes, but is not limited to, vacation days, sick days, bonuses, annuities, and retirement enhancements. Prior to submitting this report to ISBE, the report must be presented at the School Board meeting and posted on the district website. 105 ILCS 5/10-20.47
- F. **Shared service reporting and fiscal efficiency:** Annually, each school district must complete a report developed by the State Board of Education that summarizes district's attempts to improve fiscal efficiency through shared services or outsourcing in the prior fiscal year. The report must be approved by the school board and published on the website of the school district. 105 ILCS 5/17-1.1
- G. **Notice of Children's Privacy Protection and Parental Empowerment Act:** A board of education must add notice to its website advising parents of their rights under the Children's Privacy Protection and Parental Empowerment Act. 105 ILCS 5/1A-9
- H. **Waivers and modifications of School Code and administrative regulation mandates (if applicable):** A school district that seeks a waiver or modification of a School Code or administrative regulation mandate must post information that sets forth the time, date, place, and general subject matter of the public hearing that is required to be held for such waivers and modifications to be granted. The information must be posted on the district's website at least 14 days prior to the hearing. If the district is requesting to increase the fee charged for driver education authorized pursuant to Section 27-24.2 of the School Code, the website information must include the proposed amount of the fee the district will request. 105 ILCS 5/2-3.25g(c-5)
- I. **Waivers or modifications of administrative rules regarding contract contracting with a commercial driver training school to provide driver education:** Except with respect to contracting for adaptive driver's education, a school district that seeks a modification or waiver of administrative rules regarding contracting with a commercial driver training school to provide the course of study authorized under Section 27-24.2 of the School Code must post a copy of the final contract between the district and the commercial driver training school on the district's website. 105 ILCS 5/2-3.25g(d).
- J. **Bullying Prevention Policy:** A school district must post its policy on bullying to its website and also include it in the student handbook, and, where applicable, post where other policies, rules, and standards of conduct are currently posted in the school. 105 ILCS 5/27-23.7(b)(10). A school district must also create a review and re-evaluation process in order to assess the effectiveness of its policy on bullying. Section 27-23.7(d) of the School Code (105 ILCS 5/27-23.7(d)) requires

a school district to conduct this policy evaluation every 2 years and make necessary and appropriate revisions to its policy. The information collected as a result of the policy evaluation must be made available on the school district's website. This information includes but is not limited to factors such as the frequency of victimization; student, staff, and family observations of safety at a school; identification of areas of a school where bullying occurs; the types of bullying utilized; and bystander intervention or participation. 105 ILCS 5/27-23.7(b)(11)

K. **Student Discipline Report & School Discipline Improvement Plan:** Beginning with the 2017-2018 school year, a school district that is in the top 20% of school districts in the state in any one of the metrics listed below for 3 consecutive years is required by the State Board of Education to submit a plan that identifies the strategies the school district will implement to reduce the use of exclusionary disciplinary practices or racial disproportionality or both, if applicable. Those metrics include the following:

1. Total number of out of school suspensions divided by the total district enrollment by the last school day in September for the year in which the data was collected, multiplied by 100;
2. Total number of out-of-school expulsions divided by the total district enrollment by the last school day in September for the year in which the data was collected, multiplied by 100;
3. Racial disproportionality, defined as the overrepresentation of students of color or white students in comparison to the total number of students of color or white students on October 1st of the school year in which data are collected, with respect to the use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (which must be calculated using the same method as the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights uses).

A school district must approve this plan at a public school board meeting and post it to the school district's website. A school district must also submit a progress report to the State Board of Education one year after being identified in the top 20% of the metrics listed above and post this report to its website showing the implementation of the plan and results achieved. 105 ILCS 5/2-3.160(b)

L. **Notice, Agenda and Minutes of school board meetings**

1. **Notice** - Public notice of any public meeting shall be given by posting a copy of the notice at the principal office of the school district or, if no such office exists, at the building in which the meeting is to be held. In addition, a school district must post notice on its website of all meetings of the school board. Any notice of an annual schedule of meetings must remain on the website until a new public notice of the schedule of regular meetings is approved. Any notice of a regular meeting that is posted on the

website must remain posted on the website until the regular meeting is concluded. 5 ILCS 120/2.02

2. **Agenda** - A school district must ensure that at least one copy of any requested notice and agenda for the meeting is continuously available for public review during the entire 48-hour period preceding the meeting. Posting of the notice and agenda on the school district's website satisfies this requirement for continuous posting 5 ILCS 120/2.02
3. **Minutes** - A school district must post the minutes of any regular school board meeting that is open to the public on the school website within 10 days of the approval by the board of education members. Any minutes of meetings open to the public posted on the school district's website shall remain posted for at least 60 days after their initial posting. 5 ILCS 120/2.06

**M. Information pertaining to benefits offered through the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund for employees whose compensation package exceeds \$75,000 & \$150,000:**

1. **In excess of \$75,000:** Each school district must post (either on its website, or a physical copy in district offices + directions on the website as to where a copy can be obtained), a report that includes the total compensation package of all district employees whose total compensation package exceeds \$75,000. This annual posting must occur within 6 days after approving the district's budget each year. The only items that need be reported are payment by the employer for salary, health insurance, a housing allowance, a vehicle allowance, a clothing allowance, bonuses, loans, and vacation and sick days granted. While the Attorney General may interpret this requirement to only apply to IMRF employees (or she may interpret it as applying to all District employees), at this time we are counseling clients to include TRS employees on the report as well because they already have to be included in the ISBE report required under 105 ILCS 5/10-20.47.
2. **In excess of \$150,000:** Each school district must post (either on its website, or a physical copy in district offices + directions on the website as to where a copy can be obtained), the total compensation package of any District employee whose total compensation package that is equal to or in excess of \$150,000. This posting must occur at least 6 days prior to the Board's approval of the compensation package. For this posting, the only items that need be reported are payment by the employer for salary, health insurance, a housing allowance, a vehicle allowance, a clothing allowance, bonuses, loans, and vacation and sick days granted. Again, the Attorney General has not yet decided whether this applies to IMRF employees only, or all District employees. The conservative approach is that it applies to all District employees. 5 ILCS 120/7.3(b)

- N. **FOIA Documents:** Each school district must prominently display at each of its administrative offices, make available for inspection and copying, send through the mail if requested, and make available on its website each of the following: (a) A brief description of itself, which will include, but not be limited to, a short summary of its purpose, a block diagram giving its functional subdivisions, the total amount of its operating budget, the number and location of all of its separate offices, the approximate number of full and part-time employees, and the identification and membership of any board, commission, committee, or council which operates in an advisory capacity relative to the operation of the public body, or which exercises control over its policies or procedures, or to which the public body is required to report and be answerable for its operations; and (b) A brief description of the methods whereby the public may request information and public records, a directory designating the Freedom of Information officer or officers, the address where requests for public records should be directed, and any fees allowable under Section 6 of this Act. 5 ILCS 140/4.
- O. **Communication mechanism to contact elected board members:** Effective as of January 1, 2015, a school district outside of the City of Chicago that maintains an internet website (other than a social media website) must, by April 1, 2015, post to its website for the current calendar year a mechanism for the public to electronically communicate with elected members of the school district. Such a mechanism could be an email address but also could be another method for communicating with the board, such as a “contact us” form on the district website. If school board members do not have individual district-issued email addresses, a school district is not required to provide each board member his or her own official email address. It is sufficient that a school district simply post a uniform single email address (either for the board as a whole or the address of an individual board or staff member) to the website, making clear that the entire board can be contacted through that address. 50 ILCS 205/20(a).

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- P. Don't post student records.
- Q. Don't post confidential employee information.
- R. Don't post political statements/endorsements.

**II. Media Relations**

- A. Do prepare for communication accordingly (i.e. have notes if speaking live or being interviewed)
  - B. Do identify your target audience
  - C. Do stick to the facts, and always be truthful
  - D. Do show compassion, understanding of public concerns where appropriate (sensitive or controversial topics)
  - E. Do maintain objectivity (as if reporting from a third party perspective)
  - F. Do have a unified voice for all administrators
  - G. Do understand what can and cannot be shared publicly and maintain confidentiality accordingly
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- H. Don't provide more information than is required
  - I. Don't use educational jargon or acronyms (without explanation)
  - J. Don't argue with the media
  - K. Don't speak or provide a statement out of anger
  - L. Don't provide information that should not be released to the public (i.e. confidential information/ findings during an ongoing investigation)
  - M. Don't discuss disagreements between administrators publicly

### III. Teachers, Students & Difficult Parents

#### A. Teacher-Student Boundaries

1. Do remind teachers they are role models (not student's friend)
    - a. Encourage teachers to remain professional in the workplace. Teachers should maintain decorum in the classroom
    - b. Teachers are to be "friendly" with their students but not "a friend."
  2. Do encourage teachers to set ground rules for communication with their students early in the school term.
  3. Do avoid communicating with students through social networking sites or text messages.
    - a. Remind teachers that conduct outside of the classroom (such as social media) can still impact their job at the school district.
    - b. Teachers should avoid posting homework assignments and syllabi to social networking sites. If teachers do, they should have a separate professional social networking account solely for the purpose of communicating with students.
  4. Do discipline teachers for improper conduct with students.
  5. Do follow student confidentiality laws: Remind teachers not to share confidential information such as student records or an IEP with third parties unless consistent with School Student Records Act.
  6. Do be cautious when alone with students: In addition to maintaining professionalism with students, encourage teachers to be mindful of the perception of interactions with students as well.
  7. Do document when a student is inappropriate with a teacher and/or staff member and report to proper administrator.
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8. Don't use social media or text messages to converse with students.
  9. Stay away from unsupervised communications with students.
  10. Don't engage in inappropriate activity or conversations with students
  11. Don't invite students to teacher's home: Teachers risk complaints from parents or criminal charges (contributing to the delinquency of a minor)

12. Don't give students rides home.
13. Don't provide counseling to students unless you are designated to do so.
14. Don't spend too much time discussing personal life with students

#### **IV. Difficult Parents**

- A. Do establish communication protocols: Let parents know at beginning of school term the best way to contact you including office hours.
- B. Do give parent space to express frustration - make them feel heard (even when they over-complain/exaggerate a concern).
- C. Do remain calm when talking to a difficult parent but also be firm
- D. Document parent's concerns and keep a record: These documents may be included as evidence in any disciplinary hearings or investigations.
- E. Do ask how parents would like the situation handled.
- F. Do train teachers and administrators on conflict management and de-escalation.
- G. Do take responsibility and apologize if a mistake was made
- H. Do follow up with parents regarding their concerns (even if concern is unfounded): Persevere in trying to genuinely address parental concerns and provide ongoing information.

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- I. Don't interrupt parents while they explain a concern
  - J. Don't be rude, short (including improper body language -i.e. eye rolling, raised tone of voice)
  - K. Don't retaliate (especially towards the student for actions of parent)

#### **V. Special Circumstances**

- A. **Parent Sex Offender (720 ILCS 5/11-9.3)**
  1. Do provide notice to parents of a parent sex offender at the school district or a sex offender within the area of a student's bus stop location.
  2. Do require permission from the District prior to a parent sex offender visiting school district grounds or attending any school event



3. Do require parent sex offender to notify principal of their arrival as well as departure from school grounds or school district activity
4. Do keep parent sex offender under constant supervision during visits to school grounds and attendance at school events.
5. Do address concerns of other parents within the school district

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6. Don't attempt to hide the fact that a parent is a sex offender within the school district
  7. Don't prevent parent sex offender from visiting school grounds for a legitimate purpose (i.e. picking up student/ parent-teacher conference)

**B. DCFS (325 ILCS 5/4)**

1. Do know who mandated reporters are (i.e. school personnel)
2. Do know when one must report to DCFS: Where there is a reasonable cause to believe that a child is abused or neglected.
3. Do understand the different types of abuse to look for
  - a. Physical – bruises, fractures, excessive corporal punishment, use of controlled substances
  - b. Sexual – recurring pain or itching in genital or anal areas/ STDs
  - c. Neglect – consistent hunger in the morning; underweight; poor hygiene; failure to obtain adequate medical care/attending when needed; no home supervision.
4. Do support students who report abuse
5. Do maintain confidentiality outside of required reporting
6. Do report when in doubt if a student is being abused or neglected
7. Do follow up with written report after verbal report
8. Do notify Superintendent or Building Principal that report has been made

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9. Don't act shocked when student reveals information to you

10. Don't share information with those who are not entitled to such information
11. Don't delegate reporting to someone else
12. Don't refuse to cooperate with DCFS

**C. Police**

1. Do know and understand any and all reciprocal reporting guidelines contained within an intergovernmental agreement between the school district and the local police.
2. Do make a report to local law enforcement within 24 hours of determining that a student poses a clear and present danger. 20 Il. Admin. Code 1230.120; 405 ILCS 5/6-103.3.
3. Do notify parents immediately when their student has been arrested on school grounds.
4. Do understand what constitutes a clear and present danger:
  - a. Student demonstrates threatening physical or verbal behavior.
  - b. Communicates a serious threat or physical violence against a reasonably identifiable victim.
  - c. Poses a clear and imminent risk of serious physical injury to themselves or another person.
5. Do properly train all those who are required to report to recognize when a student poses a clear and present danger to themselves or others.
6. Do consider the student's age, mental condition, and other circumstances in determining whether a student poses a clear and present danger.
7. Do notify parents by the next school day when a report is made regarding their child.