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THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

BEFORE

THE OFFICE OF EMPLOYEE APPEALS

_____)	
In the Matter of:)	
)	OEA Matter No.: 2401-0118-10
HELENE HODGES,)	
Employee)	
)	Date of Issuance: May 25, 2012
v.)	
)	
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA)	
PUBLIC SCHOOLS,)	
Agency)	Sommer J. Murphy, Esq.
_____)	Administrative Judge
Helene Hodges, Employee, <i>Pro Se</i>		
Sara White, Esq., Agency Representative		

INITIAL DECISION

INTRODUCTION AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

On November 2, 2009, Helene Hodges (“Employee”) filed a petition for appeal with the Office of Employee Appeals (“the OEA” or “the Office”) contesting the District of Columbia Public Schools’ (“Agency” or “DCPS”) action of terminating her employment through a Reduction-in-Force (“RIF”). The effective date of the RIF was November 2, 2009. Employee’s position of record at the time her position was abolished was an ET-15 Elementary Teacher at Kenilworth Elementary School (“Kenilworth”). Employee was in Educational Service status at the time she was terminated.

I was assigned this matter in February of 2012. On February 6, 2012, I issued an Order requiring the parties to submit briefs on the issue of whether Agency conducted the instant RIF in accordance with applicable District laws, statutes, and regulations. Both parties submitted responses to the Order. The record is now closed.

JURISDICTION

This Office has jurisdiction in this matter pursuant to D.C. Official Code §1-606.03 (2001).

ISSUE

Whether Agency's action of separating Employee from service pursuant to a RIF was done in accordance with all applicable laws, rules, or regulations.

BURDEN OF PROOF

OEA Rule 628.1, 59 DCR 2129 (March 16, 2012) states:

The burden of proof with regard to material issues of fact shall be by a preponderance of the evidence. "Preponderance of the evidence" shall mean:

That degree of relevant evidence which a reasonable mind, considering the record as a whole, would accept as sufficient to find a contested fact more probably true than untrue.

OEA Rule 628.2 *id.* states:

The employee shall have the burden of proof as to issues of jurisdiction, including timeliness of filing. The agency shall have the burden of proof as to all other issues.

FINDINGS OF FACTS, ANALYSIS, AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

On September 10, 2009, former D.C. School Chancellor Michelle Rhee authorized a Reduction-in-Force ("RIF") pursuant to D.C. Code § 1-624.02, 5 DCMR Chapter 15, and Mayor's Order 2007-186. Chancellor Rhee stated that the RIF was necessitated for budgetary reasons, explaining that the 2010 DCPS fiscal year budget was not sufficient to support the current number of positions in the schools.¹

Although the instant RIF was authorized pursuant to D.C. Code § 1-624.02,² which encompasses more extensive procedures, for the reasons explained below, I find that D.C. Official Code § 1-624.08 ("Abolishment Act or the Act") is the more applicable statute to govern this RIF.

¹ See *Agency's Answer*, Tab 1 (December 14, 2009).

² D.C. Code § 1-624.02 states in relevant part that:

(a) Reduction-in-force procedures shall apply to the Career and Educational Services... and shall include:

- (1) A prescribed order of separation based on tenure of appointment, length of service including creditable federal and military service, District residency, veterans preference, and relative work performance;
- (2) One round of lateral competition limited to positions within the employee's competitive level;
- (3) Priority reemployment consideration for employees separated;
- (4) Consideration of job sharing and reduced hours; and
- (5) Employee appeal rights.

Section § 1-624.08 states in pertinent part that:

(a) *Notwithstanding any other provision of law, regulation, or collective bargaining agreement either in effect or to be negotiated while this legislation is in effect for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2000, and each subsequent fiscal year, each agency head is authorized, within the agency head's discretion, to identify positions for abolishment (emphasis added).*

(b) Prior to February 1 of each fiscal year, each personnel authority (other than a personnel authority of an agency which is subject to a management reform plan under subtitle B of title XI of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997) shall make a final determination that a position within the personnel authority is to be abolished.

(c) *Notwithstanding any rights or procedures established by any other provision of this subchapter, any District government employee, regardless of date of hire, who encumbers a position identified for abolishment shall be separated without competition or assignment rights, except as provided in this section (emphasis added).*

(d) An employee affected by the abolishment of a position pursuant to this section who, but for this section would be entitled to compete for retention, shall be entitled to one round of lateral competition pursuant to Chapter 24 of the District of Columbia Personnel Manual, which shall be limited to positions in the employee's competitive level.

(e) Each employee selected for separation pursuant to this section shall be given written notice of at least 30 days before the effective date of his or her separation.

In *Mezile v. D.C. Department on Disability Services*, the D.C. Superior Court found that “the language of § 1-624.08 is unclear as to whether it replaced § 1-624.02 entirely, or if the government can only use it during times of fiscal emergency.”³ The Court also found that both laws were current and that the government triggers the use of the applicable statute by using “specific language and procedures.”⁴

However, the Court of Appeals took a different position. In *Washington Teachers' Union, the District of Columbia Public Schools (“DCPS”) conducted a 2004 RIF “to ensure balanced budgets, rather than deficits in Fiscal Years 2004 and 2005.”*⁵ The Court of Appeals found that the 2004 RIF, conducted for budgetary reasons, triggered the Abolishment Act (“the

³ *Mezile v. District of Columbia Department on Disability Services*, No. 2010 CA 004111 (D.C. Super. Ct. February 2, 2012).

⁴ *Id.* at p. 5.

⁵ *Washington Teachers' Union, Local # 6 v. District of Columbia Public Schools*, 960 A.2d 1123, 1125 (D.C. 2008).

Act”) instead of “the regular RIF procedures found in D.C. Code § 1-624.02.”⁶ The Court stated that the “ordinary and plain meaning of the words used in § 1-624.08(c) appears to leave no doubt about the inapplicability of § 1-624.02 to the 2004 RIF.”⁷

The Abolishment Act applies to *positions abolished for fiscal year 2000 and subsequent fiscal years* (emphasis added). The legislation pertaining to the Act was enacted specifically for the purpose of addressing budgetary issues resulting in a RIF.⁸ The Act provides that, “notwithstanding any rights or procedures established by any other provision of this subchapter,” which indicates that it supersedes any other RIF regulations. The use of the term ‘notwithstanding’ carries special significance in statutes and is used to “override conflicting provisions of any other section.”⁹ Further, “it is well established that the use of such a ‘notwithstanding clause’ clearly signals the drafter’s intention that the provisions of the ‘notwithstanding’ section override conflicting provisions of any other sections.”¹⁰

The Abolishment Act was enacted after § 1-624.02, and thus, is a more streamlined statute for use during times of fiscal emergency.¹¹ Moreover, the persuasive language of § 1-624.08, including the term ‘notwithstanding’, suggests that this is the more applicable statutory provision to conduct RIFs resulting from budgetary constraints. Accordingly, I am primarily guided by § 1-624.08 for RIFs authorized due to budgetary restrictions. Under this section, an employee whose position was terminated may only contest before this Office:

1. That he or she did not receive written notice thirty (30) days prior to the effective date of their separation from service; and/or
2. That he or she was not afforded one round of lateral competition within their competitive level.

Employee asserts the following as grounds for reversing her termination:

- a. The Competitive Level Documentation form contains inaccurate information.
- b. Agency failed to acknowledge her “value-added” contributions to the student body during the 2004/2005 and 2006/2007 school years.
- c. Employee attended multiple courses to ensure her designation as a “highly qualified” teacher.
- d. Agency failed to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act during Employee’s tenure.

Agency submits that it conducted the RIF in accordance with the District of Columbia Municipal Regulations and the D.C. Official Code. Agency contends that it provided Employee

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at 1125.

⁹ *Burton v. Office of Employee Appeals*, 30 A.3d 789 (D.C. 2011).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Mezile v. D.C. Department on Disability Services*, No. 2010 CA 004111 (D.C. Super. Ct. February 2, 2012.)

with one round of lateral competition, which resulted in her being the lowest rated employee in her competitive level. Agency further contends that it properly afforded Employee thirty (30) days written notice prior to the effective date of her termination.

Under Title 5 DCMR § 1501.1, the Superintendent of DCPS Schools is authorized to establish competitive areas when conducting a RIF so long as those areas are based “upon all or a clearly identifiable segment of the mission, a division or a major subdivision of the Board of Education, including discrete organizational levels such as an individual school or office.” For the 2009/2010 academic school year, former DCPS Chancellor Rhee determined that each school would constitute a separate competitive area. In accordance with Title 5, DCMR § 1502.1, competitive levels in which employees subject to the RIF competed were based on the following criterion:

1. The pay plan and pay grade for each employee;
2. The job title for each employee; and
3. In the case of specialty elementary teachers, secondary teachers, middle school teachers and teachers who teach other specialty subjects, the subject taught by the employee.¹²

Here, Kenilworth Elementary School was identified as a competitive area and ET-15 Elementary Teacher was determined to be the competitive level in which Employee competed. According to the Retention Register provided by Agency, there were seven (7) Elementary Teacher positions at Kenilworth and two (2) positions were identified to be abolished under the RIF. Because Employee was not the only person within her competitive level, she was required to compete in a round of lateral competition.

According to Title 5, DCMR § 1503.2 *et al.*:

If a decision must be made between employees in the same competitive area and competitive level, the following factors, in support of the purposes, programs, and needs of the organizational unit comprising the competitive area, with respect to each employee, shall be considered in determining which position shall be abolished:

- (a) Significant relevant contributions, accomplishments, or performance;
- (b) Relevant supplemental professional experiences as demonstrated on the job;

¹² *Agency Brief* (March 13, 2012).

- (c) Office or school needs, including: curriculum, specialized education, degrees, licenses or areas of expertise; and
- (d) Length of service.

Based on § 1503.1, Agency gave the following weights to each of the aforementioned factors when implementing the RIF:

- (a) Office or school needs, including: curriculum, specialized education, degrees, licenses or areas of expertise - (75%)
- (b) Significant relevant contributions, accomplishments, or performance – (10%)
- (c) Relevant supplemental professional experiences as demonstrated on the job – (10%)
- (d) Length of service – (5%)¹³

Agency argues that nothing within the DCMR, applicable case law, or D.C. Official Code prevents it from exercising its discretion to weigh the aforementioned factors as it sees fit. Agency cites to *American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO v. OPM*, 821 F.2d 761 (D.C. Cir. 1987), wherein the Office of Personnel Management was given “broad authority to issue regulations governing the release of employees under a RIF...including the authority to reconsider and alter its prior balance of factors to diminish the relative importance of seniority.” I agree with this position and find that Agency had the discretion to weigh the factors enumerated in 5 DCMR 1503.2 in a consistent manner throughout the instant RIF.

Competitive Level Documentation Form

Agency employs the use of a Competitive Level Documentation Form (“CLDF”) in cases where employees subject to a RIF must compete against each other in lateral competition. In conducting the instant RIF, the principal of Kenilworth was given discretion to assign numerical values to the first three factors listed in Title 5, DCMR § 1503.2, *supra*, as they deemed appropriate, while the “length of service” category was completed by the Department of Human Resources (“DHR”).

Employee received a total of twenty-four and a half (24.5) points on her CLDF and was therefore ranked the lowest in her competitive level. Employee’s CLDF stated in pertinent part:

¹³ It should be noted that OEA has consistently held that DCPS is allowed discretion to accord different weights to the factors enumerated in 1503.2. Thus, Agency is not required to assign equal values to each of the factors. See *White v. DCPS*, OEA Matter No. 2401-0014-10 (December 30, 2001); *Britton v. DCPS*, OEA Matter No. 2401-0179-09 (May 24, 2010).

“Ms. Hodges has not demonstrated her contribution to Kenilworth Elementary School. The lessons delivered were very low rigor and were not aligned to the standards. Additionally she demonstrates a lack of classroom management as well as ineffective use of instructional time. She was rarely prepared and provided work that did not contribute to high student achievement. This school year, Ms. Hodges is continuing some of the same poor instructional practices....Additionally, during observations, she is not sharing the work load with the co-teacher and appears lost. She continues not to be prepared and instructional time continues to be lost because of this...Ms. Hodges continues to demonstrate ineffectiveness in the advancement of student achievement at Kenilworth. Students are not benefiting from her services because too much instructional time is wasted, lessons are not being delivered, and her co-teaching has been lacking.”¹⁴

Office or school needs

This category is weighted at 75% on the CLDF and includes: curriculum, specialized education, degrees, licenses or areas of expertise. Employee received a total of one (1) point out of a possible ten (10) points in this category and contends that the CLDF did not account for her significant contributions to the school and was not an accurate representation of her professional record. However, Employee has not provided sufficient *credible* evidence that her score should be bolstered in this area. In addition, it was within the principal’s discretion to assign a numerical value in this category.

Significant relevant contributions, accomplishments, or performance

This category is weighted at 10% on the CLDF and includes factors such as student outcomes, ratings, awards, and attendance. Employee received zero (0) points in this area. Her CLDF states that “Ms. Hodges has not led, created, or helped to lead any programs in the school since her arrival at Kenilworth Elementary School in February. She verbally says what she can do or bring to Kenilworth but never has carried anything out.”¹⁵ Employee has provided several documents which highlight her various activities during her tenure with Agency, but has failed to expound upon how such activities have been significant, therefore indicating that additional points should be awarded in this category. In this instance, I will not substitute my judgment for that of the principal of Kenilworth, as he or she was in the best position to observe and evaluate both Employee and her colleagues.

¹⁴ *Agency Brief*, Exhibit B (February 28, 2012).

¹⁵ *Id.*

Relevant supplemental professional experiences as demonstrated on the job

This category accounts for 10% of the CLDF. Her CLDF states that “Ms. Hodges has a wealth of training in reading and staff development that she has not shared at Kenilworth to the detriment of student learning.”¹⁶ Employee received a total of zero (0) points and has not provided any *credible* documentation to support additional points being awarded here.

Length of service

This category accounts for 5% of the CLDF and was calculated by the Department of Human Resources by adding the following: 1) years of experience; 2) military bonuses; 3) D.C. residency points; and 4) rating add—four years of service was given for employees with an “outstanding” or “exceeds expectations” evaluation within the past year. The length of service calculation, in addition to the other factors, were weighted and added together, resulting in a ranking for each competing employee.

Employee had a Service Computation Date (“SCD”) of 2004, which equates to five (5) years of experience on her CLDF. Employee did not receive points for D.C. Residency, Veterans Preference, or the ratings add for an “Exceeds Expectations” evaluation during the prior school year.

In reviewing the documents of record, Employee does not offer any statutes, case law, or other regulations to refute Agency’s position regarding the principal’s authority to utilize discretion in completing an employee’s CLDF during the course of the instant RIF. In *Washington Teachers’ Union Local No. 6, Am. Fed’n of Teachers, AFL-CIO v. Bd. of Educ. of the Dist. of Columbia*, 109 F.3d 774 (D.C. Cir. 1997), the D.C. Court of Appeals, in evaluating several union arguments concerning a RIF, stated that “school principals have total discretion to rank their teachers” and noted that performance evaluations are “subjective and individualized in nature.”¹⁷ According to the CLDF, Employee received a total score of twenty-four and a half (24.5) points after all of the factors outlined above were tallied and scored.¹⁸ The other Elementary Teacher who was identified to be separated under the RIF received a total of twenty-five (25) points on their CLDF. Other employees who were retained in Employee’s competitive level received CLDF scores of at least fifty-eight and a half (58.5) points, scores much higher than Employee’s. Again, Employee has not proffered any evidence to suggest that a re-evaluation of her CLDF scores would result in a different outcome.¹⁹

Accordingly, I find that the Principal of Kenilworth had discretion in completing Employee’s CLDF, as he or she was in the best position to observe and evaluate the criteria

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *See also American Fed’n of Gov’t Employees, AFL-CIO v. Office of Pers. Mgmt.*, 821 F.2d 761, 765 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (noting that the federal government has long employed the use of subjective performance evaluations to help make RIF decisions.)

¹⁸ The Undersigned AJ has re-calculated Employee’s CLDF to account for additional points being awarded for the “Years of Service” category.

¹⁹ *See Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc.*, 477 U.S. 242, 248 (1986) (stating that a material fact is one which might affect the outcome of the case under governing law.)

enumerated in DCMR §1503.2, *supra*, when implementing the instant RIF. While it is unfortunate that Agency had to release any employee as a result of budgetary constraints, there is nothing within the record that would lead the Undersigned to believe that the RIF was conducted unfairly. I therefore find that Employee was properly afforded one round of lateral competition as required by D.C. Official Code § 1-624.08.

Title 5, §1506 of the DCMR provides the notice requirements that must be given to an employee affected by a RIF. Section 1506.1 states that “an employee selected for separation shall be given specific written notice at least thirty (30) days prior to the effective date of the separation. The notice shall state specifically what action is taken, the effective date of the action, and other necessary information regarding the employee’s status and appeal rights.” Additionally, the D.C. Official Code § 1-624.08(e) which governs RIFs provides that an Agency *shall* (emphasis added) give an employee thirty (30) days notice *after* such employee has been *selected* for separation pursuant to a RIF (emphasis added).

Employee received her RIF notice on October 2, 2009 and the RIF effective date was November 2, 2009. The notice stated that Employee’s position was being abolished as a result of a RIF. The notice further provided Employee with information regarding her right to appeal the termination. It is therefore undisputed that Employee was given the required thirty (30) days written notice prior to the effective date of the RIF.

D.C. Official Code § 2-1411.02 specifically reserves complaints of unlawful discrimination to the Office of Human Rights (“OHR”). Per this statute, the purpose of the OHR is to “secure an end to unlawful discrimination in employment...for any reason other than that of individual merit.” Complaints classified as unlawful discrimination are described in the District of Columbia Human Right Act.²⁰ Additionally, District Personnel Manual (“DPM”) § 1631.1(q) reserves allegations of unlawful discrimination to Office of Human Rights. Moreover, the Court in *Anjuwan v. D.C. Department of Public Works* held that OEA’s authority over RIF matters is narrowly prescribed.²¹ The Court explained that OEA lacks the authority to determine broadly whether the RIF violated any law except whether “the Agency has incorrectly applied...the rules and regulations issued pursuant thereto.” The holding in *Anjuwan* further provided that OEA’s jurisdiction cannot exceed statutory authority and thereby, OEA’s authority in RIF cases is to “determine whether the RIF complied with the applicable District Personnel Statutes and Regulations dealing with RIFs.” *Citing Gilmore v. Board of Trustees of the University of the District of Columbia*, 695 A.2d 1164, 1167 (D.C. 1997). However, it should be noted that the Court in *El-Amin v. District of Columbia Dept. of Public Works*²² stated that OEA may have jurisdiction over an unlawful discrimination complaint if the employee is “contending that he was targeted for whistle blowing activities outside the scope of the equal opportunity laws, or that his complaint of a retaliatory RIF is different for jurisdictional purposes from an independent complaint of unlawful discrimination or retaliation...”²³

²⁰ D.C. Code §§ 1-2501 *et seq.*

²¹ 729 A.2d 883 (December 11, 1998).

²² 730 A.2d 164 (May 27, 1999).

²³ *El-Amin*; *citing Office of the District of Columbia Controller v. Frost*, 638 A.2d 657, 666 (D.C. 1994).

Here, Employee's claims as described in her petition for appeal do not allege any whistle blowing activities as defined under the Whistleblower Protection Act, nor does it appear that her termination was retaliatory in nature. I therefore find that Employee's claims regarding alleged violations of discrimination fall outside the scope of OEA's jurisdiction.

Based on the foregoing, I conclude that Agency's action of abolishing Employee's position was done so in accordance with D.C. Official Code § 1-624.08 and the Reduction-in-Force which resulted in her removal is upheld.

ORDER

It is hereby ORDERED that Agency's action of abolishing Employee's position through a Reduction-In-Force is UPHELD

FOR THE OFFICE:

SOMMER J. MURPHY, ESQ.
ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGE