

THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

BEFORE

THE OFFICE OF EMPLOYEE APPEALS

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| _____ |) | |
| In the Matter of: |) | |
| |) | OEA Matter No.: 2401-0185-10 |
| BETTY WILLIAMS, |) | |
| Employee |) | |
| |) | Date of Issuance: June 25, 2012 |
| v. |) | |
| |) | |
| DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA |) | |
| PUBLIC SCHOOLS, |) | |
| Agency |) | Joseph E. Lim, Esq. |
| _____ |) | Senior Administrative Judge |
| Kristin Dobbs, Employee Representative | | |
| Iris Barber, Esq., Agency Representative | | |

INITIAL DECISION

INTRODUCTION AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

On November 30, 2009, Betty Williams (“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 a ET-15 Counselor at Ballou Senior High School. Employee was serving in Educational Service status at the time she was terminated.

I was assigned this matter on February 8, 2012. On February 16, 2012, I ordered the parties to submit briefs on the issue of whether Agency conducted the instant RIF in accordance with applicable District laws, statues, and regulations. Agency complied, but Employee asked for an extension of the deadline. This request was granted. Both parties submitted timely responses to the order. After reviewing the documents of record, I find that there are no material issues of fact in dispute. Therefore, I further find that an evidentiary hearing is unwarranted in this matter. 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. Public Schools 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") is the more applicable statute to govern this RIF.

Specifically, section § 1-624.08 states in pertinent part that:

¹ See *Agency's Answer*, Tab 1 (December 31, 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.

(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 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

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).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

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

Employee’s Position

Employee submits that Agency failed to give her a round of lateral competition because it failed to consider her education, experience, and contributions to the school. She attests that her efforts have resulted in increasing college acceptance and attendance for at-risk populations at Ballou Senior High School.¹²

Agency’s Position

Agency submits that it conducted the RIF in accordance with the District of Columbia Municipal Regulations and the D.C. Official Code by affording Employee one round of lateral competition and thirty (30) days written notice prior to the effective date of her termination. Agency further maintains that it utilized the proper competitive factors in implementing the RIF and that the lowest ranked ET-15 Counselor, Employee, was terminated as a result of the round of lateral competition.

Analysis

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.)

¹² Employee Brief at p. 5 (April 12, 2012).

Under Title 5 DCMR § 1501.1, the Superintendent of DCPS 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.¹³

Here, Ballou Senior High School was identified as a competitive area, and ET-15 Counselor was determined to be the competitive level in which Employee competed. According to the Retention Register provided by Agency, there were three (3) ET-15 Counselor positions subject to the RIF. Of these positions, two (2) positions were identified to be abolished.

Employee was not the only ET-15 Counselor within her competitive level and therefore, was required to compete with other employees in one 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;
- (c) Office or school needs, including: curriculum, specialized education, degrees, licenses or areas of expertise; and

¹³ Agency Brief at pp. 2-3 (March 8, 2012). School-based personnel constituted a separate competitive area from nonschool-based personnel and are precluded from competing with school-based personnel for retention purposes.

(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%)¹⁴

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 Ballou Senior High School was given discretion to assign numerical values to the first three factors enumerated in Title 5, DCMR § 1503.2, *supra*, as deemed appropriate, while the “length of service” category was completed by the Department of Human Resources (“DHR”).

Employee received a total of ten and a half (10.5) points on her CLDF, and therefore, was ranked the lowest in her respective competitive level. Employee’s CLDF stated, in pertinent part, the following:

“Ms. Williams...does not work to ensure all students gain success in their grade level. For example, she has provided students with erroneous information which resulted in student retention...Students often complain about often being turned away by the employee when they are in need of information and assistance. This employee works against the wishes of the school administrator’s as they apply to direct service to students and outcomes that directly benefit students or processes that support student success in the classroom...This employee often refuses to support the needs of the classrooms. She only elects to work on initiatives that she deems worthwhile...Ms. Williams has often

¹⁴ 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).

gotten into conflicts with staff members. She has been identified amongst the staff as someone who is not a team player and tends to work in a vacuum. She rarely sees her students to a real degree...”¹⁵

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 one (1) point out of a possible ten (10) points in this category; a score much lower than other employee’s within her competitive level. Employee argues that her score failed to take into account her contributions.

The principal of Ballou Senior High School was given the discretion to complete Employee’s CLDF. Employee has failed to provide credible evidence that would bolster a score in this area, such as proof of degrees obtained pertinent to her work, licenses or other specialized education.

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.¹⁶ 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.

Significant relevant contributions, accomplishments, or performance

This category is weighted at 10% on the CLDF. Per Title 5, DCMR §1503.2, this category requires Employee’s “significant relevant contributions, accomplishments, *or* performance (emphasis added). This category evaluates any clear, significant contributions made by employees, above what would normally be expected of an employee in his or her competitive level.

Employee received zero (0) points in this area and contends that her valuable contributions were not considered within the CLDF. Based on the notations made by the principal on Employee’s CLDF, there is no evidence to show that he did not consider the totality of Employee’s efforts. With respect to this section, I find that in this matter I will not substitute my judgment for that of management, namely the principal of the school, as it relates to the score he accorded to Employee and her colleagues in the instant matter.

Relevant supplemental professional experiences as demonstrated on the job

¹⁵ Agency Brief, Exhibit B (March 8, 2012).

¹⁶ Agency Brief at pp. 4-5 (March 8, 2012).

This category accounts for 10% of the CLDF. Employee received zero (0) points in this area. Employee has not provided any documentation to supplement additional points being awarded in this area. I incorporate by reference my reasoning from above and I find that in this matter, I will not substitute my judgment for that of the school's principal as it relates to the score the principal accorded to Employee and her colleagues in the instant matter.

Length of service

This category was completed by DHR and was calculated 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 has not provided supporting documentary evidence to support any additional points being awarded in this category. Employee received a total of 3 points in this category. I find that Agency properly calculated this number.

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 ten and a half (10.5) points after all of the factors outlined above were tallied and scored. The next lowest colleague who survived the instant RIF received a total score of forty-two and a half (42.5) points. Despite Employee's protestations to the contrary, there is no credible indication that any supplemental evidence would supplant the higher scores received by the remaining colleagues in Employee's competitive level who were not separated from service. Employee has only proffered unsubstantiated allegations and mere conjecture to support her contention that her position should have survived the instant RIF. Employee has not proffered any credible evidence to suggest that a re-evaluation of her CLDF scores would result in a different outcome in this case.¹⁸

Accordingly, I find that the principal of Ballou Senior High School had discretion in completing Employee's CLDF, as he was in the best position to observe and evaluate the criteria enumerated in DCMR §1503.2, *supra*, when implementing the instant RIF. Moreover, it appears as though Employee's basis for requesting an evidentiary hearing is to be afforded an opportunity to explore and undoubtedly dispute “...interpretations of their worth against [the]

¹⁷See 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).

¹⁸See *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.)

principals' evaluations."¹⁹ 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 Agency did not abuse its discretion in completing the CLDF, and Employee was properly afforded one round of lateral competition as required by D.C. Official Code § 1-624.08.

Thirty (30) days written Notice

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* give an employee thirty (30) days notice *after* such employee has been *selected* for separation pursuant to a RIF (Emphasis added).

Here, Employee received her RIF notice on October 2, 2009, and the RIF effective date was November 2, 2009. The notice states that Employee's position is being abolished as a result of a RIF. The Notice also provides Employee with information about her appeal rights. Employee does not challenge that she was given the required thirty (30) days written notice prior to the effective date of the RIF.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, I find that Employee's position was abolished after she properly received one round of lateral competition and a timely thirty (30) day legal notification was properly served. I therefore conclude that Agency's action of abolishing Employee's position was done 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:

Joseph E. Lim, Esq.
Senior Administrative Judge

¹⁹ *Washington Teachers' Union* at 780.