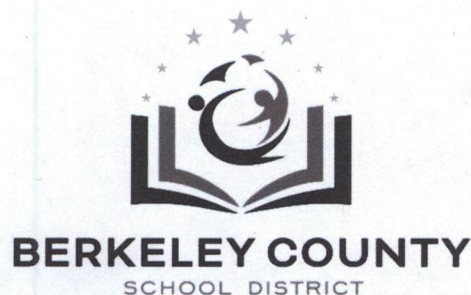


Memo



To: All Employees

From: Eddie Ingram *EF*

Date: October 2, 2020

Re: Social Media Use, Media Communications, and Classroom Instruction

The beginning of the 2020-2021 school year is proving to be unlike any other. We are all dealing with the unique challenges of educating our students during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also navigating our work demands in the best way we can to protect the health and safety of our students, co-workers, families, and ourselves. In many ways, the issues related to COVID-19, including how educational services are delivered, has become highly politicized. At the same time, our country is confronted with issues of race, inequality, and social justice that have prompted protests and public demonstrations throughout the country. The fact that the presidential, statewide, and local elections are nearing has only escalated political tensions that manifest themselves everyday on social media and in the workplace.

The Berkeley County School District is not immune to the many political and cultural issues that have arisen over the past several months. In fact, we have received numerous complaints during the beginning of the school year from parents, employees, and other concerned citizens regarding our employees' use of social media, comments made to the media, and classroom discussions and assignments. Not only do these complaints interfere with the District's core mission of educating our students by diverting resources and employee time from more productive uses, the underlying conduct leading to these complaints often has a tendency to disrupt the learning environment and threaten the public trust that is vitally important to the District's operation of our schools. Because these issues have more frequently arisen through the first weeks of the 2020-2021 school year than in previous years and may arise more frequently as we get closer to election day if they go unaddressed, it is necessary that I provide this reminder about District policies and expectations.

The District is mindful of employees' right to free speech protected by the First Amendment, but our employees need to understand that right is not unlimited. Although District employees have a right to speak as citizens on matters of public concern, they do not enjoy such rights when speaking as an employee about a matter of personal interest. Personal grievances and complaints about conditions of employment do not constitute protected speech about matters of public concern. Also, in certain circumstances, the District can restrict or address employee speech on matters of

public concern where its interests in promoting efficiency, avoiding disruption, or maintaining public trust outweigh the interests of the employee. Furthermore, the First Amendment does not require that the District tolerate behavior and speech that is disruptive or insubordinate.

With those principles in mind, please review the following reminders about the District's policies and expectations:

Social Media Use: Social media use by District employees is governed by Policy GBEEA. Under this policy, District employees must ensure that all content associated with their personal social media accounts is consistent with their role as public employees. Employees are held to the same professional standards in their use of social media as they are for any other public conduct. In using social media, employees are required to comply with District policies, including Anti-Harassment (GBAA), Staff Conduct (GBEB), and Staff Conduct with Students (GBEBB). These policies prohibit, among other things, using obscene, demeaning, or derogatory language which is unsuitable in the school setting; engaging in harassment, intimidation, discrimination, or bullying; or behaving in any inappropriate manner that could adversely affect the employee's ability to perform his or her work or disrupt the educational environment. While employees are free to use their personal social media to engage in political speech, they should do so in a manner that is professional and respectful of others, including those with different political viewpoints.

Also, employees may not use social media for non-business or non-educational purposes while at work, and employees should not represent that the District has authorized them to speak on behalf of the District or that the District has approved their messages. If employees will be engaging in social media activity that is political or controversial, it is encouraged that they do not disclose their status as a District employee in their communications or on their social media account.

Media Communications: Under Policy KB, the Board Chairperson, Superintendent (or designee), and individual school principals have authority to disseminate information to the public and media about District and school matters. Any statements made to the media by other District employees must first be cleared with the school principal and then the Superintendent. This policy is intended to ensure that information disclosed to the public is accurate and consistent and not false, misleading, and incomplete.

In recent months, the District has noticed several media reports of District employees providing comments to the media about District and school operations without approval from the District. At times, these comments have been inaccurate or incomplete and have resulted in public confusion and misperceptions.

To avoid this from occurring in the future, employees should not speak to the media regarding District operations that are matters of personal interest, including personal grievances and complaints about conditions of employment, unless you have authorization from your school principal and/or myself. If you have concerns about any aspect of your employment or working conditions, those concerns should be brought to the attention of your supervisor, principal, the human resources department, or me. In addition, the District maintains a Fraud Hotline that

employees can use to report fraudulent activity anonymously. (For more information, see <https://www.bcsdschools.net/Page/31136>.)

We encourage employees to raise concerns internally because doing so will lead to the most efficient and effective resolution of those concerns. In most cases, we will be able to resolve the matter informally. However, if any employee is not satisfied with the outcome, he or she may file a grievance in accordance with Policy GBK. The District will not retaliate against any employee who reports a concern or complaint in good faith.

Instructional Assignments: Given that we are in an election year and there are many political and cultural issues that are subject to public attention and discussion, it is natural for our teachers to be inclined to incorporate these issues into classroom assignments and discussion. We do not discourage any employee from doing so, but our teachers must be mindful that doing so could be misperceived or considered controversial. In fact, we have received several complaints from parents and citizens who are concerned about the political and controversial nature of certain assignments and classroom activities.

Any presentation or discussion of controversial issues in the classrooms must be on an informative basis and comply with Policy IKB. Under this policy, teachers should guard against giving personal opinions on sectarian, religious, or political questions. Students should have the opportunity to find, collect and assemble factual material on the subject; to interpret the data without prejudice; to reconsider assumptions and claims; and to reach their own conclusions. By refraining from expressing personal views before and during the period of research and study, teachers will encourage students to search for the truth and to think out a situation. Emotional criticism and the promotion of a cause within the school are inappropriate and unscholarly. The teacher's attitude should be that of the true scholar, which is truth-seeking, open-minded, and tolerant.

If you have any questions about any of the matters addressed in the memorandum, please direct them to your supervisor, principal, or me.