



NEW JERSEY LAW REVISION COMMISSION

Draft Final Report Relating to

Clarification of Tenure Issues

September 6, 2016

The work of the New Jersey Law Revision Commission is only a recommendation until enacted.
Please consult the New Jersey statutes in order to determine the law of the State.

Please send comments concerning this report or direct any related inquiries, to:

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Executive Summary

In July 2014, the Commission authorized work on a project to conduct research and possibly clarify the language of N.J.S. 18A:17-2, the statute by which certain New Jersey school employees obtain tenure. This project results from application of the statute in three separate cases involving school secretaries attempting to retain tenure rights. In its current state, N.J.S. 18A:17-2 does not address the tenure rights of clerks, secretaries, and certain other non-teaching school employees in voluntary transfer and promotion situations.

The Commission now recommends revision of the current statute in this area so as to clarify tenure issues as discussed below.

Background

According to the New Jersey Education Association, teacher tenure is an employment security device by which the teacher attains permanent status and protection against dismissal except for just cause. But under N.J.S. 18A:17-2, secretarial, clerical, and other non-teaching employees working for public schools are eligible to obtain tenure, as well.

In *DiNapoli v. Board of Education of the Township of Verona*, a secretary was found to have forfeited tenure rights when voluntarily reassigned to a separately tenurable, certificated position with the same employer. The new position was abolished after three years and she argued that she should have been able to bump a non-tenured secretary to reacquire her old position.¹

But in *Given v. East Windsor Regional School District*, a tenured school district clerk accepted a separately tenurable secretary position and was subsequently involuntarily returned to her clerk position. She did not automatically obtain tenure as a secretary, but was found to have retained her tenure as a clerk.²

In the third case, *Colon-Serrano v. Plainfield Board of Education*, a tenured secretary was found to have forfeited tenure rights upon promotion to a non-tenurable, certificated position with the same employer.³

In its current state, N.J.S. 18A:17-2 does not address the tenure rights of secretaries upon promotion to certificated, separately tenurable positions with the same employer. The statute is also silent regarding the tenure rights of secretaries upon promotion to separately tenurable and non-certificated positions. Neither does the statute address the tenure rights of secretaries upon promotion to a non-tenurable, certificated position.

¹ *DiNapoli v. Board of Education of the Township of Verona*, 434 N.J. Super. 233 (App. Div.) (2014).

² *Given v. East Windsor Regional School District*, 1978 S.L.D. 43

³ *Colon-Serrano v. Plainfield Bd. Of Educ.*, 2007 WL 4644775 (N.J. Adm.)

Discussion

Only five New Jersey cases cite *DiNapoli*, none of which concerns public school clerical employees. *In re Nance* regards the termination of a Newark police officer and cites *DiNapoli* to make the point that an agency's conclusions are reviewed de novo.⁴ The four other cases refer to *DiNapoli* to establish that a party challenging an agency action has the burden to prove the action was arbitrary, capricious, or unreasonable. *In re Biricik* involves a dismissal challenge by a tenured school teacher.⁵ *In re Gabrys* features a police officer who requested his resignation be characterized as a leave of absence.⁶ The plaintiff in *In re Del Valle* was a Department of Human Resources employee arguing for displacement rights after a layoff.⁷ And in *In re Kingston*, a Department of Public Works laborer brought an action after being disciplined for fighting and forced to undergo a fitness-for-duty psychological examination.⁸

Two interesting scholarly articles refer to N.J.S. 18A:17-2, but are concerned chiefly with the tenure rights of teachers and school custodians.⁹

During the Commission meeting at which this project was first presented, it was pointed out that, as tenure rights in New Jersey expanded, the statutes were not always made consistent. In fact, although N.J.S. 18A:17-2 is silent on the subject of movement by employees to other positions, N.J.S. 18A:28-5 and -6, pertaining to the tenure of teaching staff members, contain language ostensibly calculated to address the various situations relevant to this project and may be of assistance.

For instance, N.J.S. 18A:28-5, titled Tenure of teaching staff members, contains the following language:

c. For purposes of this chapter, tenure in any of the administrative or supervisory positions enumerated herein shall accrue only by employment in that administrative or supervisory position. Tenure so accrued shall not extend to any other administrative or supervisory position and nothing herein shall limit or restrict tenure rights which were or may be acquired pursuant to N.J.S.18A:28-6 in a position in which the individual actually served.

Here, teachers are advised that tenure in a particular position is obtained only during employment in that position. N.J.S. 18A:28-6, titled Tenure upon transfer or promotion, also contains language that may be applicable to the Commission's work in this area:

⁴ *In the matter of Darren Nance*, City of Newark, N.J. Super. (App. Div.) Unpub. 2014 WL 3818677.

⁵ *In the matter of the Tenure Hearing of Cemran Biricik*, School District of Jersey City, Hudson County, N.J. Super. (App. Div.) Unpub. 2014 WL 5782677.

⁶ *In the matter of Justin Gabrys*, Town of Dover, N.J. Super. (App. Div.) Unpub. 2014 WL 7192537.

⁷ *In the matter of Sharon Del Valle*, Union County, N.J. Super. (App. Div.) Unpub. 2014 WL 8580962.

⁸ *In the matter of Kevin Kingston*, Township of Verona, N.J. Super. (App. Div.) Unpub. 2014 WL 8894103.

⁹ Arnold Shep Cohen, *Striking a Balance Between Teachers' Employment Rights and Professional Responsibilities*, 154-JUL N.J. Law. 43 and Sanford R. Oxfeld, *The Plight, Inter Alia, of Public School Custodians*, 285-DEC N.J. Law. 27.

a. Any such teaching staff member under tenure or eligible to obtain tenure under this chapter, who is transferred or promoted with his consent to another position covered by this chapter ... shall not obtain tenure in the new position until after

...

* * *

This section addresses what happens when a teacher is voluntarily transferred, followed by specific tenure requirements. N.J.S. 18A:17-2, had it contained similar language, might have helped avoid appellate review of the Commissioner's decision in *Given*, which featured a tenured clerk arguing that she immediately acquired tenure upon reassignment as a secretary. While it does not appear that either of the above passages would have helped clarify *DiNapoli* or *Colon-Serrano*, it is possible to synthesize appropriate language from the respective decisions in those cases.

The Commission proposes two additional provisions to N.J.S. 18:17-2, intended to resolve and clarify the issues raised in *DiNapoli* and the other secretarial/clerical tenure cases.

Subsection d.1., in the Appendix, below, addresses the situation in *Given*, in which a tenured clerk voluntarily transferred to a new tenurable position, but was involuntarily returned to her original position before she could obtain tenure; she argued unsuccessfully that the tenure she acquired as a clerk immediately transferred upon reassignment as a secretary. This provision covers both voluntary and involuntary transfers and incorporates language from subsections a. and b. of N.J.S. 18A:17-2, which identifies those persons covered by the statute. It also features language from subsection a. of N.J.S. 18A:17-6, which identifies limitations on obtaining tenure in a new position.

Subsection d.2. addresses the situation in *DiNapoli*, in which a tenured employee voluntarily transferred to new tenurable position, and was found to have abandoned her previous tenured position. It also addresses *Colon-Serrano*, which featured a tenured employee who voluntarily transferred to new non-tenurable position, and was deemed to have relinquished the protection of her clerical tenure. In the original version of this report, this subsection incorporated language from the Court's decision in *DiNapoli*, which interpreted and applied N.J.S. 18:17-2, while protecting *involuntarily* transferred employees.¹⁰ Although commenters were generally supportive of the proposed language, and found this section to consistent with the outcome of *DiNapoli*, the Commission, upon further analysis, judged it to be ambiguous as to which tenured position is at issue. A representative from the State Department of Education advised that language specifying that the position to which an employee transfers or accepts promotion is not tenure-eligible or is covered by another chapter would bring the statute directly in line with applicable case law.

¹⁰ See 434 N.J. Super. 239, "[T]he language of N.J.S.A. 18A:17-2 limits the retention of tenure to the time during which the employee holds her secretarial office, position or employment."

New Jersey Statute Relating to School Superintendents

While assistant superintendents receive the protections of tenure after satisfactory completion of the requisite period of service, superintendents are not tenured employees, and, instead, serve under employment contracts. But even though superintendent positions are not tenurable at this time, tenure rights for positions held below that of a superintendent remain intact and are retained by the individual elevated to the position of superintendent. Thus, if an individual loses a superintendent position, he may resume a lower tenured position.

N.J.S. 18A:17-20.4, entitled “Effect on pre-existing tenure rights; tenure rights of superintendent promoted from within district,” provides the following:

Nothing in this section or in this act shall affect any tenure rights which shall have already accrued to any superintendent prior to the effective date of this amendatory and supplementary act. A superintendent of schools promoted from within a district shall retain all tenure rights accrued in any position which was previously held by the superintendent in the district.

N.J.S. 18A:17-20.5, entitled “Appointment of administrative principal; reappointment; powers and duties; tenure rights,” provides in pertinent part:

* * *

No administrative principal hereafter appointed shall have tenure in any other position in the district; but nothing in this section or in P.L.1991, c. 267 (C. 18A:17-20.1 et al.) shall affect any tenure rights which shall have already accrued to any individual who was appointed as or functioning as an administrative principal prior to the effective date of . . .

* * *

Regarding whether employees transferring from secretarial or clerical positions can retain tenure acquired during such employment, the court in *DiNapoli* noted that the Legislature enacted the aforementioned N.J.S. 18A:17-20.4, which affords tenure retention rights to superintendents notwithstanding promotion or transfer, representing an intent to preserve tenure for certain employees who transferred or were promoted to a different position prior to achieving tenure in that position. But the court pointed out that N.J.S. 18A:17-2 contains no similar tenure retention provision regarding tenured secretarial employment, thus reflecting the Legislature’s decision not to afford such rights.¹¹ Accordingly, the proposed new language sets out specific limitations of secretarial/clerical tenure.

¹¹ *DiNapoli*, 434 N.J. Super. 233, 240

Removal of the term “voluntary” from subsection d.2 would seem to address a redundancy; absent that term, the sentence nonetheless implies a voluntary transfer or acceptance of a new position as opposed to the application of force. The addition of “prior to such transfer or promotion” specifies the position to which tenure has attached. Use of the word “forfeits” is intended to convey that tenure can be voluntarily given up or abandoned.

Among the other potential protective devices discussed by the Commission was a relatively straightforward written notification that, by accepting another non-tenured position, a tenured employee would lose all tenure rights in his present position.

Commission’s Recommendation

After considering comments from knowledgeable and interested individuals and organizations, the Commission proposes a revision intended to clarify current New Jersey statute, N.J.S. 18A:17-2, regarding the movement or transfer of tenured clerical, secretarial, and other non-teaching employees.

Consistent with the practice of the NJLRC, the release of this Final Report will be followed by outreach to identify state lawmakers who may be interested in sponsoring legislation in this area.

Appendix—Proposed Changes to Existing New Jersey Statute

The text of 18A:17-2, with originally proposed revisions shown with underlining and strikethrough. The more recent revisions are italicized, as follows:

18A:17-2. Tenure of secretaries, assistant secretaries, school business administrators, business managers and secretarial and clerical employees

a. Any secretary, assistant secretary, school business administrator or business manager of a board of education of any school district who has or shall have devoted his full time to the duties of his office and has or shall have served therein for three consecutive calendar years, and

b. Any person holding any secretarial or clerical position or employment under a board of education of any school district or under any officer thereof, after

1. The expiration of a period of employment of three consecutive calendar years in the district or such shorter period as may be fixed by the board or officer employing him, or

2. Employment for three consecutive academic years, together with employment at the beginning of the next succeeding academic year, an academic year being the period between the time when school opens in the district after the general summer vacation and the beginning of the next succeeding summer vacation, and

c. Any person, who has acquired, or shall hereafter acquire, tenure in any secretarial or clerical office, position or employment under the board of education of a school district and has been appointed district clerk or secretary, or shall hereafter be appointed secretary of said district, as such secretary,

shall hold his office, position or employment under tenure during good behavior and efficiency and shall not be dismissed or suspended or reduced in compensation, except for neglect, misbehavior or other offense and only in the manner prescribed by sub-article B of article 2 of chapter 6 of this title.

d. Any person identified in a. or b. of this section, under tenure or eligible to obtain tenure under this chapter:

1. Who is transferred or promoted to another position covered by this chapter shall not obtain tenure in the new position until after meeting the specific tenure requirements for the new position;

2. Who transfers or accepts promotion from the tenured position, to a position that is not tenure-eligible, or to a position that is covered by another chapter, forfeits tenure of the office, position, or employment held prior to such transfer or promotion.