

EPISODE 112

Writing Effective Recommendation Letters for Staff



INSTRUCTIONAL
LEADERSHIP SHOW



Essential Question



How can I write recommendation letters for staff that will have a positive impact on the profession?

Part 1:



Our Ethical Obligations

Two Professional Obligations



- Help good candidates get jobs
- Warn others against hiring bad candidates

The Profession



We aren't just individual educators
working in individual schools in
individual districts—we're part of a

profession.



Trapping Talent



Trapping Talent



Refusing to write a recommendation letter in order to “keep” someone is unethical.

Withholding well-earned recommendations is not an employee retention strategy.

Part 2:



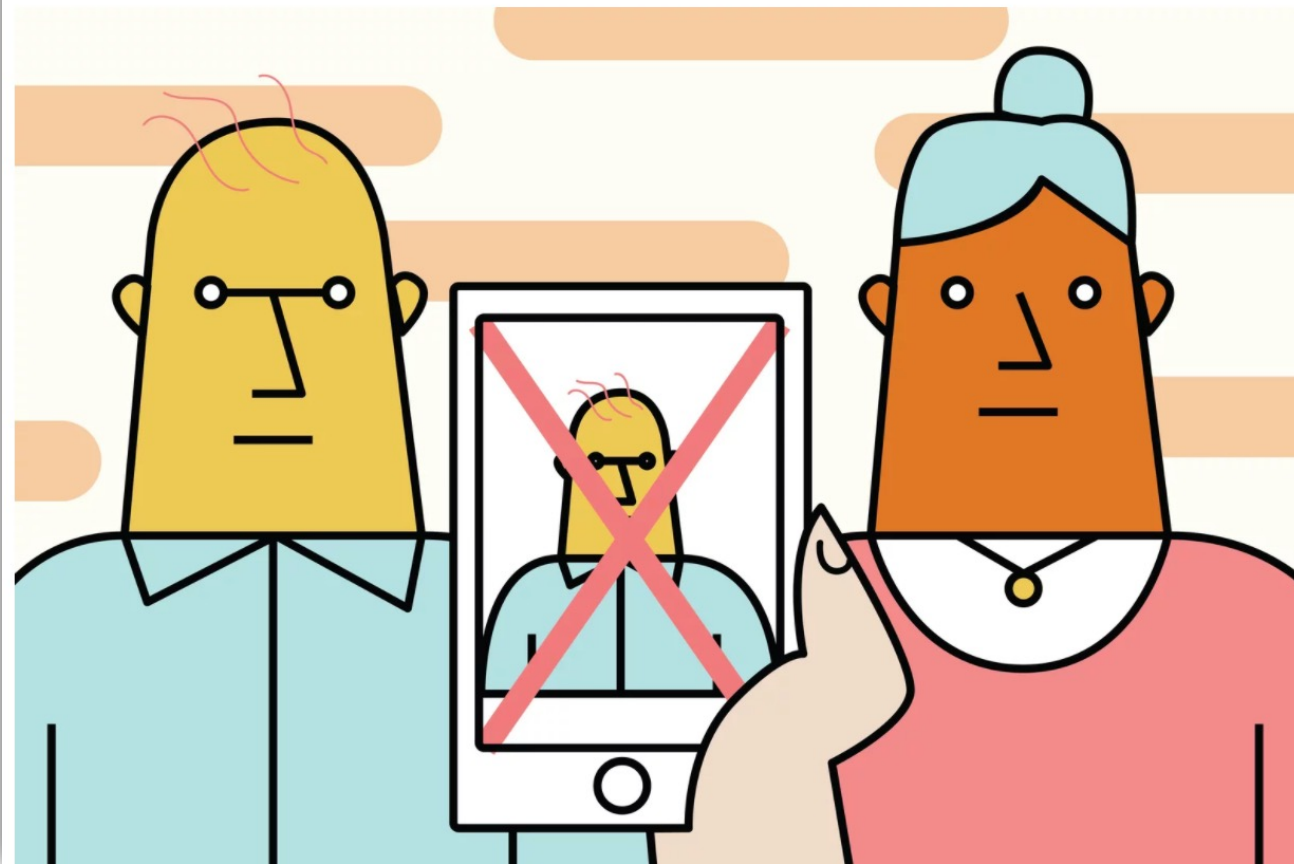
Bad Candidates

Without Warning System, Schools Often 'Pass The Trash' — And Expose Kids To Danger

April 6, 2018 · 11:58 AM ET



ERIN B. LOGAN





Legally Speaking: “Pass the Trash” Update: One Year Later

By Katrina Homel

A look at the law that requires disclosure of child abuse and sexual misconduct allegations for prospective school district employees

Just over a year ago, on June 1, 2018, New Jersey’s *P.L. 2018 c. 5* (codified at *N.J.S.A. 18A:6-7.6-7.13*), commonly known as the “pass the trash” law, went into effect. The law, among other things, imposes stricter background check requirements related to child abuse and sexual misconduct for school and school-contracted service provider employees, as well as penalties for noncompliance. These requirements are in addition to the already-existing criminal background check requirements for school employees.

The “pass the trash” legislation resulted, in large part, from a series of high-profile teacher sexual misconduct cases that received significant media coverage in a relatively short time prior to the law’s passage. The law was passed to address situations where an employee who has engaged in questionable conduct involving children is encouraged to seek other employment, usually in exchange for a neutral employment reference — a practice that has been dubbed, “passing the trash.”



Passing the Trash



It's also unethical to:

- Write an ineffective staff member a good recommendation letter to help them get another job so you're rid of them
- Trade a reference for a resignation
- Cover up abuse/misconduct

Severe Misconduct



- The reference check system is not adequate for severe cases of suspected misconduct
- Recommendation letters and references can be and are faked by unethical candidates
- Use the proper channels through HR, law enforcement, and your state licensing authority

How References Are Faked



- Google voice phone number/burner phone
- Co-conspirator
- Overreliance on reference list

Catching Fake References



- Use publicly available information—name, phone number, etc.
- Confirm private cell/direct numbers by calling listed numbers
- Trust your gut—if something seems off, investigate
- Use your network

The Dilemma



- If you give someone a bad recommendation letter, they won't use it, so it's a waste of your time
- If you refuse to give someone a recommendation letter, they won't list you as a reference

The Solution: Use The Code



- There's an implicit but well-known "code" administrators use in recommendation letters
- You can use this code to write honest recommendation letters that the candidate will actually use

The “Code” for Bad Recommendations



- Basic duties rather than accomplishments
- Compliments about perfunctory matters like punctuality
- Lack of actual stated endorsement
- Urging to contact for details—the magic phrase

Basic Duties

- Team player
- Good attendance
- Consistently participates in required activities
- Puts forth effort
- Submits records in a timely manner



Withholding Your Endorsement



- "I am writing this letter of reference for..."
- "X asked me to provide this letter of reference, and I am happy to speak to my experience over the past Y years..."
- "This letter of reference is for..."
- "I am writing in regard to X, who is applying for a position within your organization."

The Magic Phrase



“Please contact me directly at # if you are considering X for a position in your organization, and I will be happy to provide additional details.”

Part 3:



Good Candidates

How To Help Good Candidates



- Give your endorsement explicitly
- Describe accomplishments, not duties
- Be detailed & specific about projects
- Warn against missing out

Give Your Explicit Endorsement



- "It is my pleasure to recommend X for Assistant Principal positions in your district."
- "I highly recommend X for Y positions in your district."
- "I recommend her without reservation, and would be happy to answer any questions you may have."
- "X has my highest recommendation"
- "X has my full support and endorsement as she pursues..."

Accomplishments, Not Duties



- Just as your own résumé and cover letter should describe your accomplishments rather than duties, your recommendation letters for other staff should describe specific accomplishments
- Listing duties *may* be helpful for unusual or combined roles
- Excessive focus on routine, expected duties can be a red flag
- Describe 1-3 big accomplishments in detail
- Ask for ideas if you need to

Name Specific Projects



- Identify 1 to 3 specific projects, committees, or initiatives the person worked on, individually or as part of a team
- Get input from the person—“What projects are you most proud of?”
- Describe the person’s contribution
- Describe the impact on the school/students

Instructional or Job Specifics



- Look at your observation & evaluation records
- Identify specific instructional (or other job-specific) strengths
- Address strengths relevant to the job they're seeking

Warn Against Missing Out



To seal the deal, let the reader know they're missing out if they don't hire the applicant:

- "X is a leader not to be missed—I strongly encourage you to interview her to get a sense of her potential."
- "X is a rising star, and will be an asset to any organization."
- "X has demonstrated enormous promise, and will excel in..."
- "X will be missed, but I cannot wait to see the impact she has in a role with more influence."

Recap: Recommending Good Candidates



- Give your endorsement explicitly
- Describe accomplishments, not duties
- Be detailed & specific about projects
- Warn against missing out

What Good Candidates Need



Good candidates need you to slow down and put in the effort to write them a strong, detailed letter.

Re-using letters is OK, but only to a point.

An Overly Generic Letter



To Whom It May Concern:

It is always a pleasure to write a letter of recommendation for an individual who has demonstrated that they are well deserving of such a rare commendation. Upon reviewing X's past work ethic and his current credentials, I am certain you will agree.

I have known X for nearly X years; during this time I have remained most impressed by his high level of consistency with regard to his job performance and his professional responsibilities.

X is a high achiever, one who is unsatisfied with average or ordinary results. He is bright and energetic. He takes great pride in his ability to surpass expectations. Oftentimes he is the motivating torch that ignites the dwindling flames of those around him. His phenomenal ability to meet administrative deadlines, develop and implement school-wide initiatives, and gather growth experiences from any situation are testaments to the well-deserved professional reputation that he has established.

It is without reservation and with great enthusiasm that I recommend X as an administrative candidate. I consider it an honor and privilege to recommend him as he embodies and exemplifies the characteristics associated with outstanding leadership. If I can provide any additional information about this applicant that may allow him favorable consideration, please do not hesitate to ask it of me. I may be reached at X...



Generic Letters vs. Templates



- Generic letters can say nice things, but lack the specificity they'd need to be compelling
- Templates can follow an effective overall structure, while allowing you to make much more specific claims and back them with specific evidence
- When using a template, get specifics from the candidate

Coming Soon



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REPERTOIRE

Justin Baeder

MAIN MENU

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Template: Recommendation Letter

"Search Selection" element—searchable dropdown list, with "Add New" as an option at the top

Document Name: Recommendation Letter Marissa Johnson Assistant Principal 2021-06-11

Document name generated automatically from template fields

Layout Editor:

I am writing this letter to recommend [Requestor Full Name] for [Requestor Applying Role] positions in your school or district. As [Role] at [School Name], I have worked closely with [Requestor Title] [Requestor Last Name] over the past [Years Working Together] years,

Template Fields:

Requestor Full Name: Marissa Johnson

Requestor First Name: Marissa

Requestor Last Name: Johnson

Requestor Current Role: Academic Dean

Requestor Applying Role: Assistant Principal

Requestor Title (e.g. Mr. / Ms. / Mrs. / Sr. / Dr.):

Years Working Together: 3

Add Template Field

Prefilled System Fields (edit here as needed):

School Name: Wayside High School

My First Name: Justin

My Last Name: Baeder

My Title (e.g. Mr. / Ms. / Mrs. / Sr. / Dr.): Dr.

My Role: Principal

Add Phrase

Save

Document Output:

I am writing this letter to recommend Marissa Johnson for Assistant Principal positions in your school or district. As Principal at Wayside High School, I have worked closely with Ms. Johnson over the past 3 years,

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 THE PRINCIPAL CENTER

YEAR-END

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Name of Person Handling Registration *(Required)*

First

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