

**Pickering v. Board of Education of Township High
School District 205, Will County**

No. 510

SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

391 U.S. 563

Argued March 27, 1968

Decided June 3, 1968

Syllabus

Appellee, Board of Education, dismissed appellant, a teacher, for writing and publishing in a newspaper a letter criticizing the Board's allocation of school funds between educational and athletic programs and the Board's and superintendent's methods of informing, or preventing the informing of, the school district's taxpayers of the real reasons why additional tax revenues were being sought for the schools. At a hearing the Board charged that numerous statements in the letter were false and that the publication of the statements unjustifiably impugned the Board and school administration. The Board found all the statements false as charged and concluded that publication of the letter was "detrimental to the efficient operation and administration of the schools of the district" and that "the interests of the school require[d] [appellant's dismissal]" under the applicable statute. There was no evidence at the hearing as to the effect of appellant's statements on the community or school administration. The Illinois courts, reviewing the proceedings solely to determine whether the Board's findings were supported by substantial evidence and whether the Board could reasonably conclude that the publication was "detrimental to the best interests of the schools," upheld the dismissal, rejecting appellant's claim that the letter was protected by the First and Fourteenth Amendments, on the ground that as a teacher he had to refrain from making statements about the schools' operation "which in the absence of such position he would have an undoubted right to engage in." Held:

1. "The theory that public employment which may be denied altogether may be subjected to any conditions, regardless of how unreasonable, has been uniformly rejected." *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589, 605-606 (1967). The teacher's interest as a citizen in making public comment must be balanced against the State's interest in promoting the efficiency of its employees' public services. P. 568.
2. Those statements of appellant's which were substantially correct regarded matters of public concern and presented no questions [564] of faculty discipline or harmony; hence

those statements afforded no proper basis for the Board's action in dismissing appellant. Pp. 569-570.

3. Appellant's statements which were false likewise concerned issues then currently the subject of public attention and were neither shown nor could be presumed to have interfered with appellant's performance of his teaching duties or the schools' general operation. They were thus entitled to the same protection as if they had been made by a member of the general public, and, absent proof that those false statements were knowingly or recklessly made, did not justify the Board in dismissing appellant from public employment. *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254 (1964). Pp. 570-575.

36 Ill. 2d 568, 225 N. E. 2d 1, reversed and remanded.

MR. JUSTICE MARSHALL delivered the opinion of the Court.

Appellant Marvin L. Pickering, a teacher in Township High School District 205, Will County, Illinois, was dismissed from his position by the appellee Board of Education for sending a letter to a local newspaper in connection with a recently proposed tax increase that was critical of the way in which the Board and the district superintendent of schools had handled past proposals to raise new revenue for the schools. Appellant's dismissal resulted from a determination by the Board, after a full hearing, that the publication of the letter was "detrimental to the efficient operation and administration of the schools of the district" and hence, under the relevant [565] Illinois statute, *** that "interests of the school require[d] [his dismissal]."

In February of 1961 the appellee Board of Education asked the voters of the school district to approve a bond issue to raise \$4,875,000 to erect two new schools. The proposal was defeated. Then, in December of 1961, the Board submitted another bond proposal to the voters which called for the raising of \$5,500,000 to build two new schools. This second proposal passed and the schools were built with the money raised by the bond [566] sales. In May of 1964 a proposed increase in the tax rate to be used for educational purposes was submitted to the voters by the Board and was defeated. Finally, on September 19, 1964, a second proposal to increase the tax rate was submitted by the Board and was likewise defeated. It was in connection with this last proposal of the School Board that appellant wrote the letter to the editor *** that resulted in his dismissal.

Prior to the vote on the second tax increase proposal a variety of articles attributed to the District 205 Teachers' Organization appeared in the local paper. These articles urged passage of the tax increase and stated that failure to pass the increase would result in a decline in the quality of education afforded children in the district's schools. A letter from the superintendent of schools making the same point was published in the paper two days before the election and submitted to the voters in mimeographed form the following day.

It was in response to the foregoing material, together with the failure of the tax increase to pass, that appellant submitted the letter in question to the editor of the local paper.

The letter constituted, basically, an attack on the School Board's handling of the 1961 bond issue proposals and its subsequent allocation of financial resources between the schools' educational and athletic programs. It also charged the superintendent of schools with attempting to prevent teachers in the district from opposing or criticizing the proposed bond issue.

The Board dismissed Pickering for writing and publishing the letter. Pursuant to Illinois law, the Board was then required to hold a hearing on the dismissal. At the hearing the Board charged that numerous statements in the letter were false and that the publication [567] of the statements unjustifiably impugned the "motives, honesty, integrity, truthfulness, responsibility and competence" of both the Board and the school administration. The Board also charged that the false statements damaged the professional reputations of its members and of the school administrators, would be disruptive of faculty discipline, and would tend to foment "controversy, conflict and dissension" among teachers, administrators, the Board of Education, and the residents of the district.

To the extent that the Illinois Supreme Court's opinion may be read to suggest that teachers may constitutionally be compelled to relinquish the First Amendment rights they would otherwise enjoy as citizens to comment on matters of public interest in connection with the operation of the public schools in which they work, it proceeds on a premise that has been unequivocally rejected in numerous prior decisions of this Court. E.g., *Wieman v. Updegraff*, 344 U.S. 183 (1952); *Shelton v. Tucker*, 364 U.S. 479 (1960); *Keyishian v. Board of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589 (1967). "The theory that public employment which may be denied altogether may be subjected to any conditions, regardless of how unreasonable, has been uniformly rejected." *Keyishian v. Board of Regents, supra*, at 605-606. At the same time it cannot be gainsaid that the State has interests as an employer in regulating the speech of its employees that differ significantly from those it possesses in connection with regulation of the speech of the citizenry in general. The problem in any case is to arrive at a balance between the interests of the teacher, as a citizen, in commenting upon matters of public concern and the interest of the State, as an employer, in promoting the efficiency of the public services it performs through its employees.

***Because of the enormous variety of fact situations in which critical statements by teachers and other public employees may be thought by their superiors, against whom the statements are directed, to furnish grounds for dismissal, we do not deem it either appropriate or feasible to attempt to lay down a general standard against which all such statements may be judged. However, in the course of evaluating the conflicting claims of First Amendment protection and the need for orderly school administration in the context of this case, we shall indicate some of the general lines along which an analysis of the controlling interests should run.

An examination of the statements in appellant's letter objected to by the Board reveals that they, like the letter as a whole, consist essentially of criticism of the Board's allocation of school funds between educational and athletic programs, and of both the Board's and the superintendent's methods of informing, or preventing the informing of, the district's taxpayers of the real reasons why additional tax revenues were being sought for the schools. The statements are in no way directed towards any person with whom appellant would normally be in [570] contact in the course of his daily work as a teacher. Thus no question of maintaining either discipline by immediate superiors or harmony among coworkers is presented here. Appellant's employment relationships with the Board and, to a somewhat lesser extent, with the superintendent are not the kind of close working relationships for which it can persuasively be claimed that personal loyalty and confidence are necessary to their proper functioning.

We next consider the statements in appellant's letter which we agree to be false. The Board's original charges included allegations that the publication of the letter damaged the professional reputations of the Board and the superintendent and would foment controversy and conflict among the Board, teachers, administrators, and the residents of the district. However, no evidence to support these allegations was introduced at the hearing. So far as the record reveals, Pickering's letter was greeted by everyone but its main target, the Board, with massive apathy and total disbelief. The Board must, therefore, [571] have decided, perhaps by analogy with the law of libel, that the statements were per se harmful to the operation of the schools.

However, the only way in which the Board could conclude, absent any evidence of the actual effect of the letter, that the statements contained therein were per se detrimental to the interest of the schools was to equate the Board members' own interests with that of the schools. Certainly an accusation that too much money is being spent on athletics by the administrators of the school system *** cannot reasonably be regarded as per se detrimental to the district's schools. Such an accusation reflects rather a difference of opinion between Pickering and the Board as to the preferable manner of operating the school system, a difference of opinion that clearly concerns an issue of general public interest.

In addition, the fact that particular illustrations of the Board's claimed undesirable emphasis on athletic programs are false would not normally have any necessary impact on the actual operation of the schools, beyond its tendency to anger the Board. For example, Pickering's letter was written after the defeat at the polls of the second proposed tax increase. It could, therefore, have had no effect on the ability of the school district to raise necessary revenue, since there was no showing that there was any proposal to increase taxes pending when the letter was written.

More importantly, the question whether a school system requires additional funds is a matter of legitimate public concern on which the judgment of the school administration, including the School Board, cannot, in a society that leaves such questions to popular

vote, be taken as conclusive. On such a question free and open [572] debate is vital to informed decision-making by the electorate. Teachers are, as a class, the members of a community most likely to have informed and definite opinions as to how funds allotted to the operation of the schools should be spent. Accordingly, it is essential that they be able to speak out freely on such questions without fear of retaliatory dismissal.

In addition, the amounts expended on athletics which Pickering reported erroneously were matters of public record on which his position as a teacher in the district did not qualify him to speak with any greater authority than any other taxpayer. The Board could easily have rebutted appellant's errors by publishing the accurate figures itself, either via a letter to the same newspaper or otherwise. We are thus not presented with a situation in which a teacher has carelessly made false statements about matters so closely related to the day-to-day operations of the schools that any harmful impact on the public would be difficult to counter because of the teacher's presumed greater access to the real facts. Accordingly, we have no occasion to consider at this time whether under such circumstances a school board could reasonably require that a teacher make substantial efforts to verify the accuracy of his charges before publishing them. [note 4]

What we do have before us is a case in which a teacher has made erroneous public statements upon issues then currently the subject of public attention, which are critical of his ultimate employer but which are neither shown nor can be presumed to have in any way either impeded the teacher's proper performance of his daily duties in [573] the classroom [note 5] or to have interfered with the regular operation of the schools generally. In these circumstances we conclude that the interest of the school administration in limiting teachers' opportunities to contribute to public debate is not significantly greater than its interest in limiting a similar contribution by any member of the general public.

In sum, we hold that, in a case such as this, absent proof of false statements knowingly or recklessly made by him, [note 6] a teacher's exercise of his right to speak on issues of public importance may not furnish the basis for his dismissal from public employment.

It is so ordered.

MR. JUSTICE WHITE, concurring in part and dissenting in part.

The Court holds that truthful statements by a school teacher critical of the school board are within the ambit of the First Amendment. So also are false statements innocently or negligently made. The State may not fire the teacher for making either unless, as I gather it, there are special circumstances, not present in this case, demonstrating an overriding state interest, such as the need for confidentiality or the special obligations which a teacher in a particular position may owe to his superiors. [note 1] [583] The core of

today's decision is the holding that Pickering's discharge must be tested by the standard of *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254 (1964). To this extent I am in agreement.

The Court goes on, however, to reopen a question I had thought settled by *New York Times* and the cases that followed it, particularly *Garrison v. Louisiana*, 379 U.S. 64 (1964). The Court devotes several pages to re-examining the facts in order to reject the determination below that Pickering's statements harmed the school system, *ante*, at 570-573, when the question of harm is clearly irrelevant given the Court's determination that Pickering's statements were neither knowingly nor recklessly false and its ruling that in such circumstances a teacher may not be fired even if the statements are injurious. The Court then gratuitously suggests that when statements are found to be knowingly or recklessly false, it is an open question whether the First Amendment still protects them unless they are shown or can be presumed to have caused harm. *Ante*, at 574, n. 6. Deliberate or reckless falsehoods serve no First Amendment ends and deserve no protection under that Amendment. The Court unequivocally recognized this in *Garrison*, where after reargument the Court said that "the knowingly false statement and the false statement made with reckless disregard of the truth, do not enjoy constitutional protection." 379 U.S., at 75. The Court today neither [584] explains nor justifies its withdrawal from the firm stand taken in *Garrison*. As I see it, a teacher may be fired without violation of the First Amendment for knowingly or recklessly making false statements regardless of their harmful impact on the schools. As the Court holds, however, in the absence of special circumstances he may not be fired if his statements were true or only negligently false, even if there is some harm to the school system. I therefore see no basis or necessity for the Court's foray into fact-finding with respect to whether the record supports a finding as to injury. [note 2] If Pickering's false statements were either knowingly or recklessly made, injury to the school system becomes irrelevant, and the First Amendment would not prevent his discharge. For the State to be constitutionally precluded from terminating his employment, reliance on some other constitutional provision would be required.

Nor can I join the Court in its findings with regard to whether Pickering knowingly or recklessly published false statements. Neither the State in presenting its evidence nor the state tribunals in arriving at their findings and conclusions of law addressed themselves to the elements of the new standard which the Court holds the First Amendment to require in the circumstances of this case. Indeed, the state courts expressly rejected the applicability of both *New York Times* and *Garrison*. I find it wholly unsatisfactory for this Court to make the initial determination of knowing or reckless falsehood from the cold record now before us. It would be far more appropriate to remand this case to the state courts for further proceedings in light of the constitutional standard which the Court deems applicable to this case, once the relevant facts have been ascertained in appropriate proceedings.