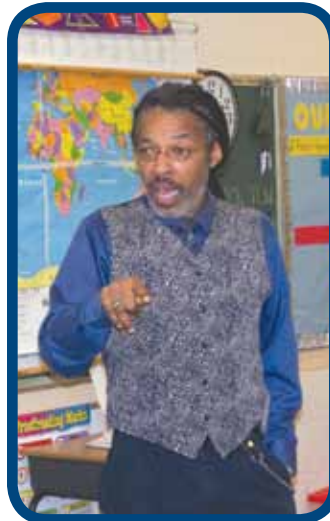




**FOR 10 YEARS**, Rob Gray taught music in the Petersburg public schools, serving 600 students every week. He loved the job, and was well-liked and respected by students, parents, and faculty alike.

Then, with one unfounded accusation from a troubled student, his career was nearly derailed. While assisting another staff member in that teacher’s classroom, Gray was struck by a student who already had been suspended from school earlier that day and was returning to collect his belongings. Gray restrained the boy and took him to the nurse’s office to be treated for a cut lip (that, a later investigation revealed, the child had incurred prior to the incident). At the office, the child erroneously claimed that Gray had struck him.



^ Rob Gray

Before he knew it, Gray was facing a criminal charge of assault, and he had to go to the police station to be fingerprinted. The school division suspended him without pay, and he found himself being investigated by Social Services as well. He went three months without pay and began seeing a counselor for stress.

**Fortunately, Gray was not alone.**

Working with students and parents, educators are vulnerable to unfounded accusation and charges. That’s one of the reasons the VEA and NEA stand ready to assist. In Gray’s case, a local UniServ representative helped answer his questions and apply for legal assistance. The VEA hired a lawyer to defend him. His attorney represented him and helped assure that he’d receive his back pay and have the chance to teach again when he was eventually exonerated, and his attorney’s fees of nearly \$7,000 were covered by the NEA’s Educators Employment Liability (EEL) Policy.

Even the best educator can be blindsided by an unfounded allegation. That’s why VEA and NEA offer comprehensive resources should a member confront a legal situation.

**They include:**

- > **Liability coverage.** This is perhaps the best-known benefit protecting members, but not the only one. Under the EEL program, members receive such benefits as \$1 million of liability coverage, reimbursement of attorney fees up to \$35,000 for defending you

in employment-related criminal matters for which you are successfully defended, and \$1,000 of bail bond coverage.

- > **Protecting your job rights.** Under a program known as the Kate Frank/DuShane Unified Legal Services Program (ULSP), the VEA and NEA share the cost of defending member job rights.
- > **UniServ support.** Your local UniServ director can familiarize you with your rights and responsibilities, attend some administrative meetings with you, help you apply for legal assistance, and provide a friendly ear in a time of need.

Gray is back on the job—and more convinced than ever of the value of his Association’s advocacy. “This is a very hazardous job,” he says. “My whole livelihood, my reputation—everything could have been taken away, just like that. That’s why I’m so glad I paid my dues religiously. Never go into the classroom without someone at your back.”

#### **Problems on the Job**

Legal issues are perhaps the most serious of challenges on your professional journey, but other potholes lurk as well. At some point in your career, you may have a disagreement with a supervisor over an assignment or evaluation, for example.

Call your VEA-NEA UniServ Director for help looking at school board policy or determining what action you should take. If appropriate, your UniServ Director can assist you with filing a grievance. Virginia’s statewide grievance procedure exists to provide school personnel with an orderly way of resolving differences with their employers.

In most cases, problems can be resolved to your satisfaction at an early stage through consultation with your immediate supervisor or principal. In other cases, the dispute may have to be carried to the superintendent or the school board, or go to a panel hearing. Be advised that Virginia law requires that you file notification of your grievance within 15 work days of the event (or when you discover the problem).■