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**CHECK, PLEASE**

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January 2011

If you have school-age children, you are certainly aware of the important role parent-volunteers play in our schools. Every school district in Kent and Ottawa counties requires a criminal background check on all parents who volunteer. For many of you, this was something you agreed to without hesitation. But for a parent with a possible blemish on their record, a criminal background check can have serious consequences. In most school districts, minor offenses can result in additional checks and a felony conviction of any kind results in that parent being banned from participating in school-related activity.

Recently, a Grand Rapids Public School (GRPS) parent was barred from volunteering at her child's school when her criminal background check revealed a conviction for check fraud from a decade ago. She is not only banned from supervising school functions, she must be escorted by a staff member anytime she enters her child's school and cannot speak to any child that is not her own. This parent made national headlines when she decided to challenge the existing GRPS policy. She obtained more than 300 signatures in support of her petition and the ACLU became involved when it sent a letter to the Superintendent of GRPS requesting that the district take a more "case by case" approach when deciding who can volunteer at school. The school board met in early December and decided to keep the policy in place as it is, but stressed that there is an appeals process for those who have been denied. The appeals process gives the superintendent the authority to consider the nature, age and circumstances of a conviction.

At the crux of the debate is the importance of keeping our children safe and not allowing those who shouldn't be around children near them. The problem with the current policy, as alleged by this particular parent, is that by banning anyone with any felony conviction, no matter when it took place or what it was for, puts many good people in the same category as those who have a history of harming children or may be violent criminals. Some believe that the policy is too broad and the facts of each case should be reviewed separately. However, others believe that carving out exceptions to the rule leads to a slippery slope and will result in more problems in the future. It will be interesting to see how other school districts in our area handle similar challenges that are sure to arise.