



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

March 2026 Episode

Public Service By (or Buy?) the Book

Susan: Hello ethical people! I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, welcoming you to the Voice of Ethics, the podcast where we dive into stories about ethics in government. And some of the stories we have dived into vary from Broadway shows to wood splitters and even bourbon. But in this episode, I thought it would be fitting to discuss one of my all-time favorite activities and pastimes - reading.

Yes, reading! My Mom once said that I was surely born with a book in my hand and surely won't be happy unless I die with a book in my hand. And while I do not wish to hasten that particular prediction, I very much wish to celebrate books and authors. In fact, today, March 2nd, is the birthday of the beloved author Dr. Seuss. And it's also the kickoff day of Read Across America Week. This week aims to encourage reading and educate people about its benefits, especially among children and young adults. There are reading events organized across the nation by schools and organizations to promote what is, hopefully, your love of reading. So check them out and start a new book this week.

So in honor of Dr. Seuss and Read Across America Week, we simply must read between the lines and do an episode about books and authors. Here we go.

If you are a regular listener, you know that our episodes normally focus on people who have made less than wise choices under the Ethics Law. But lest we judge all people and all public servants by their cover (or something like that) this week we want to look at a couple people who did the right thing by reaching out to the Ethics Commission when their public lives could overlap with the world of literary wonder, and they wanted solid advice under the law.

Let's first highlight a few relevant Advisory Opinions, which, just so you know, are helpful, protective and public record - or as you might say, an open book.

Our first Opinion takes us to the year 2007, when a fire chief in Ohio asked if he was allowed to accept a \$10,000 prize from a nationwide contest for writing an essay describing how his fire department has contributed to the community. The chief noted that he had submitted his essay electronically from his personal computer, and didn't represent himself in any way as a department employee.

The advisory opinion concluded that the chief absolutely could accept the prize money for several reasons. First, the contest was open to any eligible person, he entered the contest on his own time, the contest sponsor was not in a business or regulatory relationship with the fire department, and the prize was based on his writing skills alone and not provided as some sort of payment or supplemental compensation for his duties as a fire chief.

So well done, chief, or should I say "Author! Author!"

So we close the book on that Advisory Opinion and take us to the next one, which was just one year later in 2008. It addressed a question on whether a state agency director's good friend could enter into a contract with that state agency. The director's friend is a public author and considered an expert on DEI issues, and the agency was looking for someone to conduct training on that topic. The director wanted to

be sure there'd be no conflict of interest or public contract violation if his good friend received that training contract.

Again, kudos to that director and that agency for asking the question first, instead of wondering afterwards if what they had already done was a good idea. Instead, did absolutely the right thing by asking the question - and the answer from the Ethics Commission, you ask? Well, the commission concluded the Ethics Law did not prohibit the agency from awarding that training contract to the director's friend, provided that the director has no interest in the contract, he has no family or business relationship with that friend, potential contractor or trainer. Now, the opinion did note it would be wise for the director to consider both the appearance and advisability of the contract, but that it would not be a violation of the law.

You see, the Ethics Commission definitely does things by the book. You get it? By the book. All right, moving on. Let's now talk about somebody who didn't do things by the book. We've had two examples of people who did the right thing and asked first, now we have a story of someone who, unfortunately did not do that. So for this next story, I want to give the mic over to my colleague, an investigator right here at the Ethics Commission, Special investigator David Sturman. So, David, tell us a little bit about yourself. How did you end up at the Ohio Ethics Commission as an investigator?

David: So I've been here with the Ohio Ethics Commission since August of 2023. Before that, I was a uniformed Delaware City police officer for 23 years and my interest in working for the Ethics Commission stemmed from there.

Susan: You were a police officer for how many years?

David: 23 years.

Susan: Well thank you for your service!

David: Thank you.

Susan: That's pretty impressive in my mind so thank you for that. So what is your job like here? We know you're an investigator. What does that mean?

David: It means a lot of things, actually. The biggest thing is being an information gatherer and try and look at things from a non-biased view. So we don't make determinations of guilt. We just gather the information and send it to the commission so they can make a determination if a violation actually occurred.

Susan: Very cool. So, David, you may know that today's episode is all about Dr. Seuss,

David: Yes

Susan: because this is Read Across America Week, right? So we have been talking about stories that deal with authors, with books, things like that. So we've invited you on the podcast today because you were involved in a pretty interesting investigation about somebody who had authored a book.

David: We received an allegation involving a superintendent of a pretty decent sized school district here in Ohio. And the, it wasn't a first time superintendent. He had come from a smaller district to this larger district, and he had told them when he was hired that he had written this book. And the book was about another part of his life. And when he got hired, he decided that he was going to create a Twitter page for the district to introduce himself. And when he did that, he included the book that he had written just to show a different part of his life. And the district board members told him, please take that down and we

don't want you advertising your book. And so he, he didn't really understand why, but he eventually took it down, agreed to do that.

Fast forward a little bit. The superintendent was invited to speak at a local colleges event for future educators, and he unfortunately posted the book in his slide show. And also in addition to that, he put his personal email address and website at the bottom advertising a small consulting business that he had.

So, now, our focus at the time was the book, it had come up before, and at this point we have to think, okay, are there mitigating circumstances? Is he on his own time? Was he on district time? Was the district logo in these shots to show, "Hey, I work for the district - you should buy my book." Or is it "I'm just an educator - you should buy my book." So there's a lot of things that we have to think about that come into play to determine if the Commission is going to find a violation.

Susan: Before you go forward, there's four words that you said that I want to pick up on, and you said "he didn't know why."

David: Yes.

Susan: Why does that matter? Why? Seriously, why would the board wisely have said take down that Twitter page?

David: I found in my two years here that a lot of people just are not aware of what they can and cannot do. He should have taken Ohio Ethics training, but there's so much information to digest within a one hour period, it's probably impossible for anybody to know anything. So in general, and you say this yourself, when in doubt, ask. So he should have thought, "If this is something I can make money on," which he was, he should probably ask. And he didn't.

Susan: So while for maybe you and me and people that have been around public service for a long time this might seem second nature, but in a nutshell, why is what he was doing problematic both under the Ethics Law and just as people who live in Ohio, the whole advertising things, public time, tell me a little bit why that would even have been an issue under the Ethics Law.

David: So the commission found that he had used his position to earn something of value that he would not have been able to do if it weren't for his public position. So you can't use your public position to gain something of value.

Susan: And so what happened in the case? After the investigation kind of move forward how did it all get resolved?

David: So there were some mitigating circumstances, and the commission decided that it would be best to settle that matter.

Susan: What did the settlement agreement consist of?

David: It stated that he would not be allowed to do this type of activity in the future, that he would not be able to deny that he had done this activity, and the settlement agreement is also a public record.

Susan: So this is not a warning against people in public service from having outside interests, pursuits and passions.

David: Absolutely not.

Susan: What is it sort of a cautionary tale about, though?

David: To not use their position to earn something of value, for example, write a book and then use your position to sell the book.

Susan: Does it matter at all that you mentioned the topic that he wrote about wasn't necessarily directly related to the line of work he was in? Did that change, is that a mitigating circumstance?

David: That did not matter at all.

Susan: It's just that he was using public time, public equipment.

David: Correct.

Susan: Yeah, yeah. Do you foresee this being a problem across the board with other people, or was this a more unique case that you feel like you've worked on?

David: At the time it was unique, but in time, moving forward I have found that there are other cases involving people writing books and selling them on public time.

Susan: When you say on public time, it doesn't matter though if I was sending the email at 2:00 in the afternoon, it doesn't matter if I was using my state laptop.

David: When I say public time, I don't mean between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. that you're doing anything that represents your position. So I could be working on something at 3:00 in the morning as an investigator, and if I use whatever I'm doing to sell something or to gain something in value, I'm still in the wrong.

Susan: That makes sense. So after two years with the Ethics Commission, but more than two decades in law enforcement, if you had to boil all your advice down to one sage statement for people in public service, what would it be?

David: When in doubt, ask.

Susan: That is about the whole Ethics Law, right, in a nutshell there, isn't it?

David: Absolutely. You can never go wrong for asking.

Susan: Hey David, thank you so much for being on our podcast today, we're really grateful for your time and for your service!

David: Absolutely! Thank you very much.

Susan: Thank you again to David for taking time out of his busy day to discuss one of the more recent investigations that he was involved in. So, guys, that's one for the books. Before we close the book on this episode, let me just refer you to our show notes, where you will find two informal advisory opinions, as well as a fact sheet that might be helpful as you think more about some of the issues we have discussed today.

But before I let you go, I do have an important question to ask you. Why are writers or authors always so cold? Because they are surrounded by drafts of course! *wind blowing sound effect* Ending with a bad joke is the oldest trick in the book, isn't it? Quick, somebody stop her. Take care, everyone. Be ethical - and book smart! Bye.