

IN THE MATTER OF : NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
THE CERTIFICATES OF : STATE BOARD OF EXAMINERS
KEAH WORTHY : ORDER OF REVOCATION
_____ : DOCKET NO: 0809-248

At its meeting of July 28, 2009, the State Board of Examiners reviewed information from the Camden County Prosecutor's Office indicating that Keah Worthy pled guilty in December 2008 to Criminal Attempt/Theft By Deception. In February 2009, Worthy was sentenced to two years' probation, 100 hours of community service and ordered to forfeit her public employment. Worthy currently holds a Teacher of Preschool Through Grade 3 Certificate of Eligibility, issued in July 2001 and a Teacher of Preschool Through Grade 3 certificate, issued in July 2002. Upon review of the above information, at its September 17, 2009, meeting, the State Board of Examiners voted to issue Worthy an Order to Show Cause.

The Board sent Worthy the Order to Show Cause by regular and certified mail on September 24, 2009. The Order provided that Worthy must file an Answer within 30 days. Worthy filed an Answer on October 23, 2009. In that Answer, Worthy admitted that she pled guilty to Criminal Attempt/Theft and was ordered to forfeit her public office. (Answer, ¶ 4.) Worthy explained that she was told by the prosecutor that she would be able to teach in a parochial or private school in New Jersey or in any type of school in other states. (Answer, ¶ 5.) Worthy added that during her five-year employment with the Camden School District, she received outstanding observations, maintained perfect attendance and mentored student teachers. (Answer, ¶ 6.) She noted that she was chosen Teacher of the Year in Camden in 2004 and during the two-year pendency of the criminal proceeding "I chose to better myself and earn two

separate masters degrees.” (Answer, ¶ 6.) Worthy stated that “the charge I pled guilty to had nothing to do with my interaction or my commitment to any of my students.” (Answer, ¶ 6.)

Thereafter, pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:9-17.7(e)*, on November 10, 2009, a hearing notice was mailed by regular and certified mail to Worthy. The notice explained that it appeared that no material facts were in dispute. Thus, Worthy was offered an opportunity to submit written arguments on the issue of whether the conduct addressed in the Order to Show Cause constituted conduct unbecoming a certificate holder. It also explained that upon review of the charges against her and the legal arguments tendered in her defense, the State Board of Examiners would determine if her offense warranted action against her certificates. Thereupon, the Board of Examiners would also determine the appropriate sanction, if any. Worthy was also provided the opportunity to appear before the Board to testify on the sanction issue.

Worthy responded on December 10, 2009. In her response, Worthy explained the events that led to her guilty plea. (Hearing Response, p. 1.) She noted that she was part of the School Leadership Committee (SLC) which was established in Abbott districts “to strengthen the curriculum and enrich students’ education....” (Hearing Response, p. 1.) She stated that her role as a member of the SLC was to help develop and implement innovative curriculum programs in the classroom. (Hearing Response, p. 1.) To that end, Worthy performed those tasks “at various times, usually before school, after school and occasionally on weekends.” (Hearing Response, p.1.)

Worthy also stated that she was unaware of how much money had been budgeted for the SLC, but she knew she would be paid above her regular compensation. (Hearing Response, p. 1.) She noted that her Assistant Principal, Patricia Johnson, would periodically pass around blank time sheets for the committee members to sign. (Hearing Response, pp. 1-2.) Worthy

claimed that she did not realize at the time that Johnson had filled in times that were inaccurate. (Hearing Response, p. 2.) Worthy admitted that when questioned by Camden District officials if the times were accurate, she, like other SLC members, lied and said “yes” in order to protect Johnson and others. (Hearing Response, p. 2.) Worthy noted that she actually did the work as stated for the SLC and regretted lying to protect others. (Hearing Response, p. 2.) Finally, Worthy recalled that the deputy Attorney General (DAG) handling the case called her a victim as well and noted how helpful she was in helping convict others of a larger conspiracy. (Hearing Response, pp. 2-3.) In addition to her Hearing Response, Worthy also submitted a transcript from her sentencing, copies of recognition awards, recommendation letters, transcripts and professional development summaries.

In her testimony before the Board, Worthy reiterated that she was truly sorry for her actions and stated that her fault was in trusting her superiors. She noted that she was trapped in the situation and had to plead guilty. She again mentioned her cooperation with law enforcement and added that the DAG spoke on her behalf at sentencing. Worthy reminded the Board that she had, in fact, done the work as stated for the SLC and that only the times were inaccurate.

The threshold issue before the State Board of Examiners in this matter, therefore, is whether the conduct underlying Worthy’s conviction and resultant forfeiture of public office constitute conduct unbecoming a certificate holder. At its meeting of March 25, 2010, the State Board of Examiners reviewed the allegations in the Order to Show Cause, Worthy’s responses and her testimony. The Board of Examiners determined that no material facts related to Worthy’s offense were in dispute since she never denied that she had pled guilty to the offenses charged and had been sentenced accordingly. Thus, the Board of Examiners determined that summary decision was appropriate in this matter. *N.J.A.C. 6A:9-17.7(h)*. It is therefore

ORDERED that the charges in the Order to Show Cause are deemed admitted for the purpose of this proceeding.

The State Board of Examiners must now determine whether the conduct underlying Worthy's conviction and resulting forfeiture of public office, as set forth in the Order to Show Cause, represent just cause to act against her certificates pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:9-17.5*. The Board finds that they do.

The State Board of Examiners may revoke or suspend the certification of any certificate holder on the basis of demonstrated inefficiency, incapacity, conduct unbecoming a teacher or other just cause. *N.J.A.C. 6A:9-17.5*. "Teachers... are professional employees to whom the people have entrusted the care and custody of ... school children. This heavy duty requires a degree of self-restraint and controlled behavior rarely requisite to other types of employment." *Tenure of Sammons*, 1972 *S.L.D.* 302, 321.

Moreover, unfitness to hold a position in a school system may be shown by one incident, if sufficiently flagrant. *Redcay v. State Bd. of Educ.*, 130 *N.J.L.* 369, 371 (1943), *aff'd*, 131 *N.J.L.* 326 (E & A 1944). In this instance, Worthy has a conviction for Criminal Attempt/Theft By Deception. A conviction for a crime involving dishonesty, such as Worthy's, provides just cause for the Board to take action against her certificates. Moreover, the Board agrees with the court's reasonable conclusion that although Worthy had an exemplary career before this incident, her actions make her unsuitable to retain public office. The Commissioner has long held that teachers serve as role models for their students. Clearly, the conduct underlying Worthy's conviction demonstrates behavior that prevents her from claiming status as a role model and her certificates should be revoked.

Accordingly, on March 25, 2010, the Board of Examiners voted to revoke Keah Worthy's Teacher of Preschool Through Grade 3 Certificate of Eligibility and her Teacher of Preschool Through Grade 3 certificate. On this 29th day of April 2010 the Board of Examiners voted to adopt its formal written decision and it is therefore ORDERED that the revocation of Worthy's certificates be effective immediately. It is further ORDERED that Worthy return her certificates to the Secretary of the State Board of Examiners, Office of Licensure, P.O. Box 500, Trenton, NJ 08625-0500 within 30 days of the mailing date of this decision.

Robert R. Higgins, Secretary
State Board of Examiners

Date of Mailing:
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Appeals may be made to the Commissioner of Education pursuant to the provisions of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:6-38.4.