# School Ethics Commission Meeting Public Session Minutes

# January 25, 2022

Chairperson Robert Bender called the meeting of the School Ethics Commission (Commission or SEC) to order at 9:34 a.m.

Notice of the meeting was provided to the State House Press Corps and the Secretary of State and filed as required by the Open Public Meetings Act.

### I. Roll Call

Roll Call	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Present	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
Absent		Х					1

Also, in attendance were Salma T. Chand, Executive Director, Office of Legal Affairs and School Ethics; and Jeannine Pizzigoni and Dominic Rota, staff members. Everyone in attendance at the meeting participated via telephone/video. Jaclyn Frey, Deputy Attorney General (DAG), was not present

### II. First Public Comment

At the start of the meeting, Chairperson Bender explained to the public (who also accessed the meeting by telephone/video) how the meeting would be conducted. More specifically, Chairperson Bender explained that the public would be afforded the opportunity to provide public comment regarding his/her case; the Commission would then adjourn to executive session (on a different conference line); the Commission would return to public at approximately 12:00 p.m.; at that time, members of the public would be afforded another opportunity to provide public comment in connection with his/her case; and then the Commission would vote on matters pertinent to its business.

**9:39 a.m.** Roderick Knox, Complainant in the matter docketed as C49-21, noted his attendance, and initially inquired if there was a time limit for speaking. Executive Director Chand and Chairperson Bender responded that due to the large number of public attendees at this meeting, the Commission will limit the speakers to three minutes. Mr. Knox then proceeded by introducing himself as the Director of Operations in the Pleasantville Public School District. He then offered some information related to the Respondent in his matter. More specifically, Mr. Knox noted the Mr. Page has several complaints pending against him and "does not have any positive record of being a Board member." Mr. Knox noted, "if you review some of the most disgusting acts by the Board members of Pleasantville, you will notice that Jerome Page is connected to it." Mr. Know stated, "The children have suffered with all the Superintendents that have come and gone some because they refused to play ball. You know pay to play and they allow Mr. Page to do what he wants." Mr. Knox continued, "There has never been such a

turnaround with Superintendents in a failing district like Pleasantville anywhere else." Mr. Knox also stated, "There needs to be a State takeover, in my opinion." Mr. Knox offered that despite warnings that he received not to work in Pleasantville, he "opted to ignore the warning and go to make a difference for the children." Mr. Knox stated that "past administration has not cared, but we have a Superintendent who does." According to Mr. Knox, the Board has done "all types of unethical things to oust her [current Superintendent] and her administration." Mr. Knox further stated he noted in his Complaint "the buildings were cleaned, repair bills were paid, and the morale was changing and positive, and Jerome Page to me singlehandedly changed all of that with his vendetta to harassment and retaliation and creating a hostile environment for staff and creating a bad environment for all students, schools and staff." Mr. Knox noted too much money has been wasted in lawsuits from "defend[ing] Mr. Page and his friends, which means less money for programs to save our failing district." Mr. Knox continued, in "the two years I have been here it's a horrible experience for kids. It's a horrible experience for staff administrators and I witnessed him bully and intimidate workers in the District myself where I had to intervene. So, it's time that we really take a look at all these" complaints. Mr. Knox concluded, "Please help the kids of this District by stopping the bleeding and get rid of those who don't care a thing about the kids and their future. Thank you for your time today."

**9:41 a.m.** Thomas Whittles, Complainant in the matter docketed as C23-21, noted his attendance and stated, "I am the complaint in C23-21. The only thing I really want to say is I know the Commission will be discussing this case today in executive session. Nothing has changed since this Complaint has been filed back in July, other than the fact that the respondent Mr. Abedrabbo took it upon himself to file criminal harassment charges against me to try to quiet me down and stop me from continuing with these ethics charges, and I just want to let this Commission know that I'm not stopping. I believe what Mr. Abedrabbo did was unethical and stealing from the taxpayers. He endangered the welfare of children. It's very clear in my claim to the board and I just wanna let the board know that Mr. Abedrabbo has filed harassment charges against me in court, which now requires me to get my own attorney. I've been doing this all pro se. Uh, but I will continue to move forward for the benefit of the city of Clifton. Equip them against substance abuse, which is the organization I represent. Thank you and have a great day."

**9:43 a.m.** Lauren Papaleo, counsel on behalf of Complainant in the matter docketed as C48-21, noted her attendance, but did not offer any public comments/statements.

**9:43 a.m.** James Williams, a concerned citizen in the matters docketed as C49-21 and C51-21, noted his attendance and offered the following statement: "Thank you for your time and good morning. I'm requesting that this Commission take a closer look at what is occurring in the Pleasantville School District. The board is rogue. They have allowed an outside interest group to influence all their decision making. The children and staff are suffering the members who are compromised should be removed immediately from this Board. Every student of Pleasantville has long awaited for Superman. For a hero. Please. They are superheroes and save this District from further corruption by board members who have several serious complaints before you. Thank you for your time and I appreciate it."

**9:44 a.m.** Anthony Russo, counsel on behalf of Respondent in the matter docketed as C44-21, noted his attendance, but did not offer any public comments/statements.

**9:44 a.m.** Regina Discenza, a member of the public who did not have a case docketed on the agenda, noted her attendance, and stated she was just listening.

**9:44 a.m.** Caroline Chaudry, counsel on behalf of one of the Respondents in the matter docketed as C44-21, noted her attendance, but did not offer any public comments/statements.

**9:44 a.m.** Alyssa Weinstein, counsel on behalf of Respondent in the matter docketed as C15-21, noted her attendance, but did not offer any public comments/statements.

9:45 a.m. Priscilla Noelle, a concerned citizen in the matters docketed as C49-21 and C51-21, noted her attendance and initially noted she had difficulty finding information related the meeting on the Commission's webpage. She then made the following statement: "I would like to bring attention to the Pleasantville Board of Education. There are Board members who have a pattern of behavior of continually undermining the progress of the District. And those particular members are Jerome page, Sharnell Morgan, Miss Melo and Miss Alberto. They have cooperated and colluded with each other to conduct a coup and oust other board members. Fire attorneys that were most qualified. And since Jerome Page has took leadership of that Board he has undermined and undone everything that Natakie Chestnut-Lee, the current Superintendent, that they have suspended, has done. Natakie Chestnut-Lee has made the District fiscally sound and since she has been suspended, there has been lack of communication and there has been disorganization. I would like for all related matters of the ethics charges and countercharges to be compiled together to address this situation once and for all. Jerome Page has a history and a pattern of behavior of undermining the District and colluding with other Board members so that no progress is made. And I believe that he should be permanently banned in the State of New Jersey from any Board of Education. Because he has a pattern of behavior and I would like this Commission to take that into consideration when they are reviewing. When someone has a pattern of behavior that speaks for itself and they are unfit to be serving the community, including hiring an attorney who's undergualified, does not have a specialty in educational law. And I want the board to not just take that person in consideration, but also take Sharnell Morgan. because she has cooperated and colluded with him to undermine the progress of the District. Again, I appreciate your time and I just want Natakie Chestnut-Lee to come back to continue the good work that she started, because right now things are falling apart and parents are not notified of things that are going on and decisions are being made with votes by these Board members who have a conflict of interest. And it has been going on since they suspended her. Thank you for your time."

**9:49 a.m.** Julio Sanchez,<sup>1</sup> Pleasantville Board member and interested party in the matters docketed as C49-21 and C51-21, noted his attendance and stated: "I'm gonna be short and direct to the point Mr. Bender. May 1, 2013 you issued an advisory opinion stating that a board member who has current ethics complaint filed against them by district employee should refrain from voting on any matter involving that employee due to conflict. This was a direct response. So, a complaint or advisory opinion being active for Mr. Page because the current Superintendent at that time, had ethics charges filed against him that were waiting to be heard and he was still acting on decisions involving her being suspended and so forth. Here we are. Eight years later, a different Superintendent, same actions. Mr. Page had an ethics charges filed against him from Roderick Knox and also from Natakie Chestnut-Lee and he's ignored the fact that the advisory opinion issued eight years to let him know that he should refrain from any votes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Following the conclusion of the meeting, Mr. Sanchez sent an email to the School Ethics Commission offering additional comments that he "failed to mention" during the public session of the meeting. As these additional comments were not made during the public meeting, they are not included in the within minutes.

involving those employees that have those type of charges against him and he's doing it once again. So, I would like to see you Mr. Bender, take a much more hard. He was censored for it in 2013. I would like to see a much more hardline stance because I brought this to his attention. When he was voting to suspend our current Superintendent that he was conflicted also told Sharnell Morgan the same thing. We had two solicitors that told them the same thing. They ignored everybody and voted on it anyway and when he was giving a legal opinion that this was improper, he said and I quote, 'We heard what you said and we're willing to deal with the consequences.' There should be consequences. At some point people had to be held accountable for their actions, and Mr. Page is not. Mr. Bender someone needs to be held accountable. Thank you."

**9:51 a.m.** Lea Adams, a concerned citizen for the matters docketed as C49-21 and C51-21, noted her attendance and stated: "With all the commenters, I am in total agreement in regards to document Natakie Chestnut-Lee, who is the current Superintendent. The what's important here and also the fact that she needs to be able to come back. The actions taken against her were definitely unethical of the decision to have her suspended or removed from her position. She should be reinstated immediately. She has served, actually changed curriculum. Pleasantville is a model for Amistad implementation. Our curriculum is coming up to par. She has improved how we teach, professional development, having teacher resources and textbooks that are current and updated. We had a Board that worked with the union, that worked with the Superintendent. Things were working cohesively. We cannot go back to the same issues that all of the commenters have stated. We need Dr. Natakie Chestnut-Lee reinstated immediately. We need actions taken and I do agree with compiling all of these ethics complaints together and to move forward so the Superintendent can come back and continue doing the good work in Peasantville Public Schools. Thank you."

### III. Executive Session

At 9:53 a.m., the following **Resolution** was read:

*Whereas*, the Open Public Meetings Act (*N.J.S.A.* 10:4-6 *et seq.*) authorizes the Commission, a public body, to meet in Executive Session under certain circumstances; and

*Whereas*, the Open Public Meetings Act requires that the Commission adopt a Resolution at a public meeting to go into Executive Session; and

*Now therefore be it resolved* that, consistent with the provisions of *N.J.A.C.* 10:4-12(b), the Commission will adjourn to executive session to discuss matters which, by statute, are regarded as confidential and also to discuss matters possibly involving litigation, specifically: C67-20; C68-20; C15-21; C23-21; C44-21; C45-21; C47-21; C48-21; C49-21; C51-21; C28-20; C32-21; C36-21; C38-21; C40-21; C41-21; A01-22; A01-19; A12-19; A21-20; A01-21; A03-21; A04-21; A12-21; A13-21; A16-21; A19-21; A20-21; C63-21; C93-21; C53-21; C54-21; update on OPMA research; and update on the status of Chapter 28 regulations; and

*Now therefore be it further resolved* that the Commission will return to open session to conduct business at the conclusion of Executive Session.

Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Jude A. Tanella, to adjourn to Executive Session to discuss the matters set forth in the foregoing Resolution.

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

Vote

#### IV. Return to Public/Second Public Comment

At **12:07 p.m.**, a motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Jude A. Tanella, to return to public session for the purpose of receiving public comment/testimony, and to vote on matters discussed in Executive Session (as appropriate).

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

Vote

**12:08 p.m.** Roderick Knox, Complainant in the matter docketed as C49-21, again noted his attendance, but did not offer any further public comments/statements.

**12:08 p.m.** Thomas Whittles, Complainant in the matter docketed as C23-21, again noted his attendance, but did not offer any further public comments/statements.

**12:08 p.m.** Lauren Papaleo, counsel on behalf of Complainant in the matter docketed as C48-21, again noted her attendance, but did not offer any public comments/statements.

**12:09 p.m.** Anthony Russo, counsel on behalf of Respondent in the matter docketed as C44-21, again noted his attendance, but did not offer any public comments/statements.

**12:09 p.m.** Regina Discenza, did not have a case docketed on the agenda, again noted her attendance, but did not offer any public comments/statements.

**12:09 p.m.** Alyssa Weinstein, counsel on behalf of Respondent in the matter docketed as C15-21, again noted her attendance, but did not offer any public comments/statements.

**12:09 p.m.** Priscilla Noelle, a concerned citizen in the matters docketed as C49-21 and C51-21, again noted her attendance and stated: "I just hope that, you know, moving forward that there's more accountability. I believe that, I do not believe, sorry, that there needs to be a State monitor or State intervention with the District as long as Natakie Chestnut-Lee is reinstated to do

the good work that she was already starting up. As far as those Board members that I've stated previously, Jerome Page and Sharnell Morgan, they should be removed because they are a detriment to the district. Thank you."

**12:10 p.m.** Julio Sanchez, Pleasantville Board member and interested party in the matters docketed as C49-21 and C51-21, again noted his attendance, but did not offer any further public comments/statements.

## V. Complaints to Review

C67-20 Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Mark Finkelstein, to draft a decision as discussed.

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

Vote

C68-20 Motion was made by Jude A. Tanella, and seconded by Richard Tomko, to draft a decision as discussed.

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

C15-21 Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Mark Finkelstein, to draft a decision as discussed.

Vote	Robert Bender	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	X	Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No						0
Abstention						0

C23-21 Motion was made by Richard Tomko, and seconded by Jude A. Tanella, to draft a decision as discussed.

### Vote

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

C44-21 Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Richard Tomko, to draft a decision as discussed.

#### Vote

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

C45-21 Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Mark Finkelstein, to draft a decision as discussed.

Vote	Robert Bender	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	X	Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No						0
Abstention						0

C47-21 Motion was made by Jude A. Tanella, and seconded by Richard Tomko, to draft a decision as discussed.

### Vote

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	X		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

C48-21 Motion was made by Mark Finkelstein, and seconded by Dennis Roberts, to draft a decision as discussed.

#### Vote

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

C49-21 Motion was made by Richard Tomko, and seconded by Mark Finkelstein, to draft a letter decision as discussed.

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

Vote

**C51-21** Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Richard Tomko, to draft a letter decision as discussed.

Vote
------

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	X		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

### VI. Decisions to Adopt as Written

C28-20 Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Mark Finkelstein, to adopt the decision as written.

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

C32-21 Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Mark Finkelstein, to table the matter.

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х		X	4
No							0
Abstention					X <sup>2</sup>		1

C36-21 Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Mark Finkelstein, to adopt the decision as written.

Vo	ote
----	-----

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	X		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

C38-21 Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Mark Finkelstein, to adopt the decision as written.

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

 $<sup>^2</sup>$  Commissioner Tanella did not participate in the executive session discussion and/or the voting related to this matter due to a conflict of interest.

C40-21 Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Mark Finkelstein, to adopt the decision as written.

Vote

Vote	Robert Bender	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No						0
Abstention						0

C41-21 Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Mark Finkelstein, to adopt the decision as written.

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х		Х	4
No							0
Abstention					X <sup>3</sup>		1

## VII. Advisory Opinions

A01-22 Motion was made by Mark Finkelstein, and seconded by Jude A. Tanella, to adopt the advisory opinion as written.

Vote

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

**A01-19** This advisory opinion was on the agenda to make public only. The Commission did not have a sufficient number of Commissioners present to make the advisory opinion public and, therefore, no action was taken.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Commissioner Tanella did not participate in the executive session discussion and/or the voting related to this matter due to a conflict of interest.

A12-19 This advisory opinion was on the agenda to make public only. The Commission did not have a sufficient number of Commissioners present to make the advisory opinion public and, therefore, no action was taken.

A21-20 This advisory opinion was on the agenda to make public only. The Commission did not have a sufficient number of Commissioners present to make the advisory opinion public and, therefore, no action was taken.

A01-21 This advisory opinion was on the agenda to make public only. The Commission did not have a sufficient number of Commissioners present to make the advisory opinion public and, therefore, no action was taken.

A03-21 This advisory opinion was on the agenda to make public only. The Commission did not have a sufficient number of Commissioners present to make the advisory opinion public and, therefore, no action was taken.

A04-21 This advisory opinion was on the agenda to make public only. The Commission did not have a sufficient number of Commissioners present to make the advisory opinion public and, therefore, no action was taken.

A12-21 This advisory opinion was on the agenda to make public only. The Commission did not have a sufficient number of Commissioners present to make the advisory opinion public and, therefore, no action was taken.

A13-21 This advisory opinion was on the agenda to make public only. The Commission did not have a sufficient number of Commissioners present to make the advisory opinion public and, therefore, no action was taken.

A16-21 This advisory opinion was on the agenda to make public only. The Commission did not have a sufficient number of Commissioners present to make the advisory opinion public and, therefore, no action was taken.

A19-21 This advisory opinion was on the agenda to make public only. The Commission did not have a sufficient number of Commissioners present to make the advisory opinion public and, therefore, no action was taken.

A20-21 This advisory opinion was on the agenda to make public only. The Commission did not have a sufficient number of Commissioners present to make the advisory opinion public and, therefore, no action was taken.

## VIII. Other Business

C63-21 Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Jude A. Tanella to hold the matter in abeyance.

Vote

v ote									
Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total		
Yes	X		Х	Х	Х	Х	5		
No							0		
Abstention							0		

**C93-21** Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Jude A. Tanella, to hold the matter in abeyance.

#### Vote

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	X		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

C53-21 This matter was on the agenda for informational purposes only.

C54-21 This matter was on the agenda for informational purposes only.

Update on OPMA research This matter was on the agenda for informational purposes only.

**Update on the status of Chapter 28 regulations:** This matter was on the agenda for informational purposes only.

# IX. Minutes

Motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Jude A. Tanella, to adopt the minutes of the regularly scheduled meeting (public and executive) conducted on December 14, 2021.

### Vote

Vote	Robert Bender	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х	Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No						0
Abstention						0

Chairperson Bender thanked Executive Director Chand for her leadership and also thanked Dominic Rota for the work he has done on behalf of the Commission. Commissioner Bender wished them both luck in their future endeavors.

### X. Adjournment

At 12:21 p.m., a motion was made by Dennis Roberts, and seconded by Mark Finkelstein, to adjourn.

#### Vote

Vote	Robert Bender	Michael Carucci	Mark Finkelstein	Dennis Roberts	Jude A. Tanella	Richard Tomko	Total
Yes	Х		Х	Х	Х	Х	5
No							0
Abstention							0

Submitted by:

Jeannine Pizzigoni

Approved by:

Kathryn A Whalen, Esq., Director, School Ethics Commission (For Submission Only)