

9-21+SEC
SEC Dkt No. D03-20
Agency Dkt. No. 239-11/20

New Jersey Commissioner of Education
Corrected Final Decision

In the Matter of Amy Vandergrift,
Board of Education of the Township of Greenwich,
Gloucester County.

The Commissioner has reviewed the record of this matter and the decision of the School Ethics Commission (SEC) – finding that respondent violated the School Ethics Act for failure to timely file her Personal/Relative and Financial Disclosure Statements (“Disclosure Statements”) in accordance with *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-25, *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-26, and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.1. The SEC’s decision was forwarded to the Commissioner for final determination on the recommended penalty pursuant to *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-29(c). The SEC advises that respondent failed to file her Disclosure Statements despite the issuance of its October 27, 2020 Order to Show Cause. Respondent has neither filed exceptions to the recommended penalty, nor has she instituted an appeal of the SEC’s underlying finding of violation pursuant to *N.J.A.C.* 6A:4-1 *et seq.*

Upon review, the Commissioner concurs with the penalty recommended by the SEC for respondent’s failure to timely honor an obligation placed upon school officials by law. Accordingly, respondent is hereby removed – effective on the date of this decision – as a school official found to have violated the School Ethics Act for failure to file her Disclosure Statements.

IT IS SO ORDERED.¹

ACTING COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

Date of Decision: January 15, 2021
Date of Mailing: January 15, 2021

¹ This decision may be appealed to the Appellate Division of the Superior Court pursuant to *N.J.S.A.* 18A:6-9.1. Under *N.J.Ct.R.* 2:4-1(b), a notice of appeal must be filed with the Appellate Division within 45 days from the date of mailing of this decision.

Before the School Ethics Commission
Docket No.: D03-20
Decision for Failure to File Personal/Relative and
Financial Disclosure Statements

I/M/O Amy Vandergrift,
Greenwich Township Board of Education, Gloucester County

Procedural History

This matter arises from an Order to Show Cause (OTSC) issued by the School Ethics Commission (Commission) at its meeting on October 27, 2020, and served on October 27, 2020, through electronic mail, directing Respondent, a “school official” as defined in *N.J.S.A.* 18A:1223 of the School Ethics Act (Act), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-21 *et seq.*, to show cause as to why the Commission should not find her in violation of the Act for failing to file Personal/Relative and Financial Disclosure Statements (Disclosure Statements) as required by *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-25, *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-26, and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.1.¹

The OTSC issued by the Commission provided notification to Respondent that she had twenty (20) days to respond to the OTSC, and that failure to respond would be deemed an admission of the facts set forth in the OTSC. Respondent was further notified that, upon receipt of the response or upon expiration of the twenty (20) day time period for so filing, the Commission may proceed to a determination of a violation on a summary basis (i.e., without a hearing or further proceedings) in accordance with *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-1.6(c), which so permits when material facts are not in dispute. The Commission discussed this matter at its meeting on November 24, 2020.

Analysis

The Act was enacted by the New Jersey State Legislature to ensure and preserve public confidence in members of local boards of education and local school administrators. To this end, and annually, on or before April 30th of each year, all school officials, as defined in *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-23, must file Disclosure Statements with their local board secretaries or charter school designees. *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.1(a). In addition, all newly elected board members or board members appointed to fill vacancies, newly appointed members of a board of trustees of a charter school, and administrators appointed to fill a vacancy must file their Disclosure Statements within thirty (30) days of appointment or taking office. *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.1(c), *N.J.A.C.* 6A:283.1(d), *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.1(e), and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.1(f).

¹ Due to the ongoing Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, service of process was effectuated by the Commission through electronic transmission only.

Respondent is a returning school official and, therefore, was required to file her Disclosure Statements by April 30, 2020. However, pursuant to Executive Order 159, and because of the ongoing Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the deadline for returning school officials to file their Disclosure Statements was extended until July 31, 2020. Despite this extension, Respondent failed to file her Disclosure Statements within the required timeframe.

By correspondence dated approximately October 7, 2020, from the Gloucester County Office of Education, Respondent was reminded that her Disclosure Statements had not yet been filed with the Commission. This correspondence further advised Respondent that if she failed to file her Disclosure Statements by October 14, 2020, the Commission had the authority to issue an OTSC, find her in violation of the Act, and recommend a penalty up to and including removal for her non-compliance.

When the correspondence from the Gloucester County Office of Education failed to cause Respondent to file her Disclosure Statements, the Commission sent her another letter dated October 15, 2020, and informed Respondent that failure to file her Disclosure Statements by October 23, 2020, would result in the Commission voting to issue an OTSC. The Commission further advised that, if an OTSC was issued, Respondent would be assessed a penalty, up to and including removal.

When Respondent failed to file her Disclosure Statements as required by *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-25, *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-26, and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.1 by October 23, 2020, and despite receiving multiple reminders and opportunities to file her Disclosure Statements, an OTSC was issued by the Commission at its meeting on October 27, 2020. After having been served with the OTSC, Respondent still failed to file her completed Disclosure Statements, or to otherwise respond to the OTSC.

Decision/Penalty Recommendation

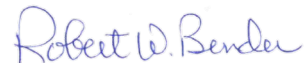
Based on the record as set forth above, at its meeting on November 24, 2020, the Commission found that Respondent violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-25, *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-26, and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.1. The Commission readily acknowledges and is sympathetic to the fact that the Coronavirus has had a significant impact on the daily lives of all people, and believes that reasonable accommodations and extensions of deadlines are appropriate and warranted in certain circumstances. However, the Commission notes that Disclosure Statements are filed annually, can be completed from any computer or device with an internet connection, and that it was only required to issue an OTSC to *two (2)* of more than sixteen thousand (16,000) school officials about the statutory obligation to file Disclosure Statements. As such, there is no reasonable basis for Respondent, based on the current record, to have failed to comply with this mandate.

Where a violation of the Act is found by the Commission, it may recommend to the Commissioner of Education that a penalty be imposed on the school official. The recommended penalty can include a reprimand, censure, suspension or removal of the school official. *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-10.12. For the reasons set forth above, the Commission recommends that the Commissioner of Education impose a penalty of **removal**, with such removal to become effective immediately upon adoption by the Commissioner of Education. However, if Respondent files her Disclosure Statements before the Commissioner of Education adopts a final decision (which will be forty-five (45) days after the mailing date of the within decision), then the Commission recommends that the Commissioner of Education, in lieu of removal, impose a **thirty (30) day suspension**, with such suspension to become effective immediately upon adoption by the Commissioner of Education.

Pursuant to *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-29(c), this decision shall be forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for review of the Commission's recommended penalty. Respondent may either: 1) file exceptions to the recommended sanction; 2) file an appeal of the Commission's finding of a violation; or 3) file both exceptions to the recommended sanction together with an appeal of the finding of a violation.

Parties taking exception to the recommended penalty of the Commission but *not disputing* the Commission's finding of a violation may file, within **thirteen (13) days** from the date the Commission's decision is forwarded to the Commissioner, written exceptions regarding the recommended penalty to the Commissioner. The forwarding date shall be the mailing date to the parties, as indicated below. Such exceptions must be forwarded to: Commissioner of Education, c/o Bureau of Controversies and Disputes, P.O. Box 500, Trenton, New Jersey 08625, marked "Attention: Comments on Ethics Commission Sanction." A copy of any comments filed must be sent to the Commission and all other parties.

Parties seeking to appeal the Commission's finding of violation *must* file an appeal pursuant to the standards set forth at *N.J.A.C.* 6A:4-1 *et seq.* within **thirty (30) days** of the filing date of the decision from which the appeal is taken. The filing date shall be three (3) days after the date of mailing to the parties, as shown below. In such cases, the Commissioner's review of the Commission's recommended sanction will be deferred and incorporated into the Commissioner's review of the finding of violation on appeal. Where a notice of appeal has been filed on or before the due date for exceptions to the Commission's recommended sanction (thirteen (13) days from the date the decision is mailed by the Commission), exceptions need not be filed by that date, but may be incorporated into the appellant's brief on appeal.



Robert W. Bender, Chairperson

Mailing Date: November 24, 2020

***Resolution Adopting Decision for Failure to File Personal/Relative and
Financial Disclosure Statements
Docket No.: D03-20***

Whereas, Respondent is a “school official,” as defined in *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-23 of the School Ethics Act (Act), at the Greenwich Township Board of Education; and

Whereas, as a returning school official, Respondent was required to file her Personal/Relative and Financial Disclosure Statements (Disclosure Statements) by April 30, 2020; and

Whereas, pursuant to Executive Order 159, and because of the ongoing Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the deadline for returning school officials to file their Disclosure Statements was extended until July 31, 2020; and

Whereas, Respondent failed to file her Disclosure Statements by July 31, 2020;

Whereas, at its meeting on October 27, 2020, and after several letters were sent to Respondent advising her of the need to file her Disclosure Statements, the School Ethics Commission (Commission) issued an Order to Show Cause (OTSC) directing Respondent to show cause why she failed to file her Disclosure Statements as required by *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-25, *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-26, and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.1; and

Whereas, Respondent failed to file her Disclosure Statements following issuance of the OTSC; and

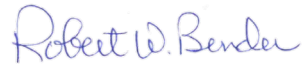
Whereas, Respondent failed to otherwise file a response to the OTSC; and

Whereas, at its meeting on November 24, 2020, the Commission found that Respondent violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-25, *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-26, and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.1 by failing to file her Disclosure Statements; and

Whereas, at its meeting on November 24, 2020, the Commission recommended that the Commissioner of Education impose a penalty of removal, with such removal to become effective immediately upon adoption by the Commissioner of Education. However, if Respondent files her Disclosure Statements before the Commissioner of Education adopts a final decision (which will be forty-five (45) days after the mailing date of the within decision), then the Commission recommends that the Commissioner of Education, in lieu of removal, impose a thirty (30) day suspension, with such suspension to become effective immediately upon adoption by the Commissioner of Education; and

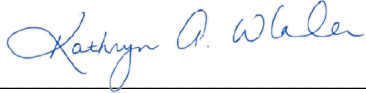
Whereas, at its meeting on November 24, 2020, the Commission agreed that the within decision accurately memorializes its findings and recommendations; and

Now Therefore Be It Resolved, that the Commission hereby adopts the within decision and directs its staff to notify all parties to this action of the decision.



Robert W. Bender, Chairperson

I hereby certify that the within Resolution was duly adopted by the School Ethics Commission at its public meeting on November 24, 2020.



Kathryn A. Whalen, Director