

IN THE MATTER OF : NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
THE CERTIFICATES OF : STATE BOARD OF EXAMINERS  
AMANDA WRIGHT-STAFFORD : ORDER OF REVOCATION  
\_\_\_\_\_ : DOCKET NO: 1011-202

At its meeting of June 16, 2011, the State Board of Examiners (Board) reviewed information received from the Essex County Prosecutor's Office indicating that on February 20, 2009, Amanda Wright-Stafford was convicted of Insurance Fraud. On November 13, 2009, Wright-Stafford was sentenced to one year of probation. The court also forever barred Wright-Stafford from holding public employment pursuant to *N.J.S.A. 2C:51-2(a)1*. Wright-Stafford currently holds a Teacher of the Handicapped certificate, issued in June 1978, a Supervisor certificate, issued in July 1982 and a Principal certificate, issued in November 1983. Upon review of the above information, at its July 28, 2011 meeting, the Board voted to issue Wright-Stafford an Order to Show Cause.

The Board sent Wright-Stafford the Order to Show Cause by regular and certified mail on August 2, 2011. The Order provided that Wright-Stafford must file an Answer within 30 days. Wright-Stafford responded on September 6, 2011. In that Answer, Wright-Stafford admitted that she had been convicted of third degree Insurance Fraud but stated that she was appealing her conviction. (Answer, ¶ 1). She added that she had successfully completed her one year probation and noted that although the court could have imposed additional sanctions it did not. (Answer, ¶ 4). Wright-Stafford argued that the Board should not revoke or suspend her certificates because even though she was barred from public employment, that ban did not prevent her "from obtaining employment in a private setting." (Answer, ¶ 5). She noted that she had been successfully employed in both private and public schools for 31 years and added that there was no motive for her to commit the crime of which she had been convicted because her

car was already paid off in full four months before the insurance company denied her claim. (Answer, ¶ 5). Finally, Wright-Stafford noted that her certificates should not be suspended or revoked because she had been under a great deal of personal stress at the time of the incident and had not taken the time “to process accurate details about my vehicle.” (Answer, ¶ 6). She urged the Board to consider her long record “to service the children and families of the state of New Jersey with honesty and integrity and refrain from suspending or revoking the teaching certificates that I hold.” (Answer, ¶ 6).

Thereafter, pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:9-17.7(e)*, on September 21, 2011, the Board sent Wright-Stafford a hearing notice by regular and certified mail. The notice explained that it appeared that no material facts were in dispute. Thus, Wright-Stafford 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 as well as arguments with regard to the appropriate sanction in the event that the Board determined to take action against her certificates. It also explained that upon review of the charges against her and the legal arguments tendered in her defense, the Board would determine if Wright-Stafford’s offenses warranted action against her certificates. Thereupon, the Board would also determine the appropriate sanction, if any. Wright-Stafford was also offered the opportunity to appear before the Board to provide testimony on the sanction issue. The certified mail copy was returned as ‘Unclaimed’ and the regular mail copy was not returned. After receiving an extension of time in which to respond, Wright-Stafford submitted a brief on November 21, 2011.

In her response, Wright-Stafford argued that her certificates should not be revoked or suspended because she had not been convicted of any of the disqualifying crimes delineated in *N.J.S.A. 18A:6-7.1 et seq.* (Hearing Response, p. 1). She added that “a third degree insurance

fraud conviction is not a behavior that would jeopardize the safety and welfare of children or my ability to effectively and positively impact their emotional, cognitive and intellectual well being.” (Hearing Response, p. 1). She noted that taking action against her certificates would hamper her ability to provide for her family financially and would be a waste of the taxpayers’ money given her wealth of experience. (Hearing Response, pp. 1-2). In the remainder of her Hearing Response, Wright-Stafford repeated her arguments that her ban from public employment should not keep her from teaching in the private sector; that she had satisfied the requirements of her one year probation; that she had a tremendous amount of professional experience that could benefit students; that action against her certificates would be excessive punishment and that her conviction was on appeal.<sup>1</sup> (Hearing Response, pp. 2-3). In addition to her Hearing Response, Wright-Stafford submitted character reference letters and requested to appear before the Board.

In testimony before the Board, Wright-Stafford’s attorney noted that a revocation of her certificates would be the potential death sentence of a career and urged proportion. In her testimony, Wright-Stafford recounted her professional experience and stated that she had never had any disciplinary issues in her 31 year career. She stated that she had a passion for helping children and families and noted that she was a role model for younger children even when she was in elementary school. She noted that this was an unfortunate situation and that she has learned from this experience. She asked the Board to have a sense of proportion and claimed that while she was not suggesting that her behavior was admirable or desirable, the safety and welfare of children was never implicated. Finally, Wright-Stafford reiterated that her experience would greatly benefit an independent or private school.

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<sup>1</sup> The Appellate Division upheld Wright-Stafford’s conviction and the Supreme Court denied her Petition for Certification. *State v. Wright-Stafford*, Dkt. No. A-1526-09T4 (App. Div. May 3, 2011), *certif. denied*, 209 N.J. 97 (2011).

The threshold issue before the Board in this matter is whether Wright-Stafford's conviction and permanent bar from holding public employment in the State of New Jersey constitute conduct unbecoming a certificate holder. At its meeting of April 2, 2012, the Board considered the allegations in the Order to Show Cause, Wright-Stafford's Answer, Hearing Response and testimony. The Board determined that no material facts related to Wright-Stafford's offense were in dispute since she admitted that the allegations in the Order to Show Cause regarding her conviction, sentence and permanent bar from public employment were accurate. Thus, the Board 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 Board must now determine whether Wright-Stafford's conviction and subsequent bar from public employment, as set forth in the Order to Show Cause, provide just cause to act against her certificates pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:9-17.5*. The Board finds that they do.

The Board 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, the Commissioner has long held that teachers serve as role models for their students. Clearly, Wright-Stafford's conviction indicates her actions here are not those of a role model. Indeed, the court agreed, ordering that she forfeit her public employment and be forever barred from holding public office pursuant to *N.J.S.A. 2C:51-2(a)1*.

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, Wright-Stafford's conviction for Insurance Fraud resulted in probation and a permanent disqualification from public employment. Although Wright-Stafford has a wealth of experience, the fact remains that she has been convicted of a crime that implicates her honesty. Moreover, her subsequent public employment ban militates in favor of revocation. An individual whose offense is so great that he or she is barred from service in public schools should not be permitted to retain the certificate that authorizes such service. Nor should a person who has been barred from teaching in a public school be permitted to continue to hold himself out as a teacher. Thus, the Board believes that the only appropriate sanction in this case is the revocation of Wright-Stafford's certificates.

Accordingly, on April 2, 2012, the Board voted to revoke Wright-Stafford's Teacher of the Handicapped, Supervisor and Principal certificates. On this 17th day of May 2012 the Board voted to adopt its formal written decision and it is therefore ORDERED that the revocation of Amanda Wright-Stafford's certificates be effective immediately. It is further ORDERED that Wright-Stafford 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.

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Robert R. Higgins, Secretary  
State Board of Examiners

Date of Mailing:

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

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