

IN THE MATTER OF	:	NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
THE CERTIFICATES OF	:	STATE BOARD OF EXAMINERS
SHEA D. LIGHTFOOT	:	ORDER OF SUSPENSION
	:	DOCKET NO: 1819-136

At its meeting of December 17, 2018, the State Board of Examiners (Board) reviewed information the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office and the Office of Student Protection (OSP) provided to the State Board of Examiners (Board) regarding Shea D. Lightfoot. In December, 2017, Lightfoot was charged with Burglary (3rd degree), Unlawful Entry (4th degree), and Criminal Mischief after she changed the lock on the door of a vacant home and attempted to move into the residence so she could live rent free. When confronted by police officers, Lightfoot initially lied and stated that she rented the house. She was unable to produce any rental agreement and the officers discovered that the house was bank-owned and had not been rented.

Lightfoot currently holds a Teacher of Elementary School in Grades K-6 and Teacher of Elementary School with Subject Matter Specialization: Social Studies in Grades 5-8 certificates. Upon review of the above information, at its January 24, 2019 meeting, the Board voted to issue Lightfoot an Order to Show Cause as to why her certificates should not be revoked.

After obtaining a good address for Lightfoot, the Board sent Lightfoot the Order to Show Cause by regular and certified mail on February 28, 2019. The Order provided that Lightfoot had 30 days to respond. Lightfoot filed an Answer on March 4, 2019.

In that Answer, Lightfoot admitted that her belongings were moved into the subject home by her ex-boyfriend, Jamar Hill. (Answer, ¶ 3). She indicated that she was not present when her items were moved in. Further, she states that Mr. Hill coerced her to present a lease he drafted to the police and forged her signature. She acknowledges that when she was first questioned, she was not completely honest with the police out of fear of retaliation from Mr. Hill. She further states that at the time of this incident, she was in an unhealthy and abusive relationship and was coerced by Mr. Hill who took advantage of her kindness. (Answer ¶ 5). She provides a report which indicates that Mr. Hill victimized her by stealing her car and personal belongings. Finally, she indicates that this is her first time dealing with the law in a

negative way. She is a long-time educator, mentor and guide for youth and has been working in the urban setting for 14 years. (Answer ¶ 6).

Thereafter, pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:9B-4.6(e)*, on March 18, 2019, the Board sent Lightfoot a hearing notice by regular and certified mail. The notice explained that there appeared to be no material facts in dispute. Thus, Lightfoot was offered an opportunity to submit written arguments on the issue of whether the conduct addressed in the Order to Show Cause provided just cause to take action against her certificates 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 his defense, the Board would determine if Lightfoot's offense warranted action against her certificates. Thereupon, the Board would also determine the appropriate sanction, if any. Lightfoot was also offered the opportunity to appear before the Board to provide testimony on the sanction issue. Lightfoot filed a written response on April 28, 2019.

In that response, Lightfoot reiterated the statements in her Answer, requested to appear before the Board, and provided additional documents regarding her allegation that Mr. Hill stole her vehicle. The hearing was scheduled for the Board's September 19, 2019 meeting. Ms. Lightfoot appeared and explained that she was coerced by Mr. Hill and that she has not been in trouble before and would like to retain her certificates.

The threshold issue before the Board in this matter is whether Lightfoot's conduct constitutes conduct unbecoming a certificate holder or other just cause. At its meeting of November 1, 2019, the Board considered the allegations in the Order to Show Cause as well as Lightfoot's Answer, Hearing Response, and testimony. The Board determined that no material facts related to Lightfoot's offense were in dispute since she admitted that she engaged in the alleged conduct. Thus, the Board determined that summary decision was appropriate in this matter. *N.J.A.C. 6A:9B-4.6(h)*. After reviewing the allegations, the Board found that Lightfoot engaged in unbecoming conduct.

The Board must now determine whether Lightfoot's conduct, as set forth in the Order to Show Cause, provides just cause to act against his certificates pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:9B-4.4*. The Board finds that it does.

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:9B-4.4. “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). Lightfoot’s conduct in attempting to reside in a vacant home clearly indicates a serious lapse in judgment. However, given Lightfoot’s presentation of mitigation, specifically her explanation of the nature of her relationship with Mr. Hill, as well as the impact of that relationship on her personal judgment, along with her otherwise unblemished record, the Board concludes that the appropriate response to her breach is a one-year suspension of her certificates.

Accordingly, on November 1, 2019, the Board voted to suspend Shea D. Lightfoot’s Teacher of Elementary Grades K-6 and Teacher of Elementary with Subject Matter Specialization: Social Studies Grades 5-8 certificates for a period of one year. On this 13th day of December, 2019 the Board voted to adopt its formal written decision and it is therefore ORDERED that Lightfoot’s certificates are hereby suspended for a period of one year, effective immediately. It is further ORDERED that Lightfoot return her certificates to the Secretary of the State Board of Examiners, Office of Certification and Induction, P.O. Box 500, Trenton, NJ 08625-0500 within 30 days of the mailing date of this decision.

Rani Singh, Secretary
State Board of Examiners

Date of Mailing:
Via certified and regular mail

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