

IN THE MATTER OF : NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
THE CERTIFICATE OF : STATE BOARD OF EXAMINERS
GEORGE T. PANTOS : ORDER OF REVOCATION
_____ : DOCKET NO: 2021-142

At its meeting of April 1, 2021, the State Board of Examiners (Board) reviewed information the Essex County Prosecutor's Office and the Office of Student Protection (OSP), formerly the Criminal History Review Unit (CHRU), provided regarding George T. Pantos. On or about January 8, 2021, Pantos pled guilty and was convicted of Purchasing Firearm Parts/ Manufacture of Untraceable Firearm (3rd Degree) in the Superior Court of New Jersey, Essex County. As a result, Pantos was placed on probation for one year and must perform community service and pay associated fines. The OSP notified the Board that, as a result of his conviction, Pantos is disqualified from public school employment pursuant to *N.J.S.A. 18A:6-7.1 et seq.* Pantos currently holds a Teacher of English Certificate.

Pantos did not challenge the accuracy of his criminal history record before the Commissioner of Education. Upon review of the above information, the Board voted at its meeting of May 13, 2021 to issue Pantos an Order to Show Cause as to why his certificate should not be revoked.

The Board sent Pantos the Order to Show Cause by regular and certified mail on May 20, 2021. The Order provided that Pantos had 30 days to respond. Pantos submitted an Answer. He indicated that he did not intentionally seek out or purchase the "item." He was employed by a licensed firearms dealer at the time and accepted the item, and before he could transport it for destruction, it was observed in plain sight in the backseat of his car. He states that he had no intention of doing anything other than destroying it at an authorized dealer's location. He further indicates that he earned multiple awards while he was a teacher. Specifically, he had a highly effective evaluation, was nominated in his district for teacher of the year, earned multiple awards for perfect attendance, and served as a local NJEA representative. The Board then requested that Pantos clarify his Answer. Pantos responded and indicated that he pled guilty to and was convicted of the charge as noted in the Order to Show Cause.

Thereafter, pursuant to *N.J.A.C.* 6A:9B-4.6(e), on August 24, 2021, the Board sent Pantos a hearing notice by regular and certified mail. The notice explained that there appeared to be no material facts in dispute. Thus, Pantos 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 found just cause to take action against his certificate. It also explained that, upon review of the charges against him and the legal arguments tendered in his defense, the Board would determine if his offense warranted action against his certificates. Thereupon, the Board would also determine the appropriate sanction, if any. Pantos was also offered the opportunity to appear before the Board to provide testimony on the sanction issue. The certified mail receipt was signed and returned, and the regular mail copy was not returned. Pantos did not file a response, nor did he notify the Board that he wished to appear for a hearing.

The threshold issue before the Board in this matter is whether Pantos's conviction and subsequent disqualification constitute conduct unbecoming a certificate holder or other just cause. At its meeting of October 28, 2021, the Board considered the Order to Show Cause, the information received from the Prosecutor's Office, the OSP, and Pantos' Answer. The Board concluded that no material facts related to Pantos' offense were in dispute since he admitted that he was convicted of the disqualifying offense. The Board therefore 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 Pantos engaged in unbecoming conduct.

The Board must now determine whether Pantos' conviction and resulting disqualification, as set forth in the Order to Show Cause, represent just cause to act against his certificate pursuant to *N.J.A.C.* 6A:9B-4.4. The Board finds that they do.

In enacting the Criminal History Review statute, *N.J.S.A.* 18A:6-7.1 *et seq.* in 1986, the Legislature sought to protect public school pupils from contact with individuals whom it deemed to be a poor example for them. Individuals convicted of crimes such as Purchasing Firearm Parts/Manufacture of Untraceable Firearm fall squarely within this category. The strong legislative policy statement is also in accord with the Commissioner's long-standing belief that teachers must serve as role models for their students.

“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, Pantos’ conviction demonstrates behavior that falls far short of a role model.

The strong policy statement on the part of the Legislature set forth in *N.J.S.A.* 18A:6-7.1(b) also offers guidance to the Board as to the appropriate sanction in this matter. 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 disqualified from teaching in a public school be permitted to continue to hold himself out as a teacher. Thus, because the Legislature and the Commissioner consider Pantos’ offense so significant, the Board believes that the only appropriate sanction in this case is the revocation of his certificate.

Accordingly, on October 28, 2021, the Board voted to revoke George T. Pantos’ Teacher of English Certificate. On this 16th day of December 2021, the Board voted to adopt its formal written decision and it is therefore ORDERED that Pantos’ certificate be revoked, effective immediately. It is further ORDERED that Pantos return his certificate 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:
By 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.her