

New Jersey Commissioner of Education
Final Decision

In the Matter of Michael Smith,
Board of Trustees of the Gray Charter School,
Essex 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 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 ultimately filed the Disclosure Statements after the issuance of the August 23, 2022 Order to Show Cause but prior to the SEC’s September 14, 2022 meeting; therefore, a penalty of reprimand is recommended. Respondent has neither filed exceptions to the recommended penalty, nor 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 reprimanded as a school official found that have violated the School Ethics Act.

IT IS SO ORDERED.¹


ANGELINA ALLEN McMILLAN, J.D.S.
ACTING COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

Date of Decision: October 24, 2022

Date of Mailing: October 24, 2022

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.: D01-22
Decision for Failure to File Personal/Relative and
Financial Disclosure Statements

I/M/O Michael Smith,
The Gray Charter School, Essex County

I. Procedural History

This matter arises from an Order to Show Cause (OTSC) that was issued by the School Ethics Commission (Commission) at its meeting on August 23, 2022, directing Respondent, a “school official” as defined in *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-23* 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 him 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*.

In the OTSC that was served on August 23, 2022, the Commission notified Respondent that he had twenty (20) days to respond to the OTSC, and further advised Respondent that failure to respond would be deemed an admission of the facts set forth in the OTSC.¹ Respondent was also 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 the material facts, as here, are not in dispute.

II. 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. By virtue of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-23.1*, the breadth of the Act was expanded to include charter school trustees and administrators.

Pursuant to *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-25*, *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-26*, and *N.J.A.C. 6A:28-3.1(a)*, all school officials must file, on forms prescribed by the Commission, Disclosure Statements with their local board secretaries or charter school designees, and must do so on or before April 30th of each year. 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:28-3.1(d)*, *N.J.A.C. 6A:28-3.1(e)*, and *N.J.A.C. 6A:28-3.1(f)*.

¹ In order to conduct business during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Commission implemented an electronic filing system, which remains a permissible method by which the Commission and parties can effectuate service of process. Consequently, service of process was effectuated by the Commission through electronic transmission only.

If a school official fails to file the required Disclosure Statements, the Commission is authorized, pursuant to *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.3(b), to issue an Order to Show Cause. Moreover, failure to timely file the required Disclosure Statements “shall constitute a violation of the ... Act and may result in the reprimand, censure, suspension or removal of a school official pursuant to the recommendation of the Commission as acted upon by the Commissioner [of Education].” *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.3(a).

Based on the list of school officials prepared by The Gray Charter School Lead, Respondent became a school official on or about November 8, 2021. Therefore, Respondent was required to file his Disclosure Statements within thirty (30) days of his appointment. Despite this fact, Respondent failed to file Disclosure Statements within the statutorily required timeframe.

Respondent also received reminders from the Commission to file his Disclosure Statements. More specifically, by electronic correspondence dated July 1, 2022, and August 2, 2022, Respondent was reminded that his Disclosure Statements had not yet been filed. Respondent was further advised that continued failure to file Disclosure Statements would result in the Commission issuing an OTSC, and recommending a penalty, up to and including removal.

When Respondent failed to file 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, an OTSC was issued by the Commission at its meeting on August 23, 2022. After having been served with the OTSC, Respondent filed his Disclosure Statements on August 29, 2022, and also filed a response to the Commission’s OTSC. More specifically, Respondent stated, “as a new Board Member, [he] was not aware of the deadline for the annual Disclosure Statement[s]” and he “was not checking emails with any regularity” because he was “devoted to planning for [his] wedding.” Importantly, Respondent did not deny that he did not file his Disclosure Statements in a timely fashion.

III. Decision/Penalty Recommendation

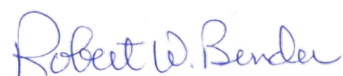
Based on the record as set forth above, and at its special meeting on September 14, 2022, the Commission found that Respondent violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-25, *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-26, and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-3.1 because he did not timely file Disclosure Statements. Although Respondent ultimately filed his Disclosure Statements, the filing was several months late, and submitted only after multiple reminders were sent reiterating his statutory obligation to file Disclosure Statements.

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:28-3.3(a); *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 **reprimand**.

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.”² A copy of any comments filed must be sent to the Commission (school.ethics@doe.nj.gov) 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: September 14, 2022

² An electronic submission may also be sent to controversiesdisputesfilings@doe.nj.gov.