

Before the School Ethics Commission
Docket No.: C13-26
Decision on Probable Cause

James A. Pressley, Sr.,
Complainant

v.

Doris Rowell,
Pleasantville Board of Education, Atlantic County,
Respondent

I. Procedural History

The above-captioned matter arises from a Complaint that was filed with the School Ethics Commission (Commission) on January 27, 2026, by James A. Pressley, Sr. (Complainant), alleging that Doris Rowell (Respondent), a member of the Pleasantville Board of Education (Board), violated the School Ethics Act (Act), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-21 *et seq.* More specifically, the Complaint avers that Respondent violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(a), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(c), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(e), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(g) and *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(i) of the Code of Ethics for School Board Members (Code). Respondent filed a Written Statement on February 26, 2026.

The parties were notified by correspondence dated May 19, 2026, that the above-captioned matter would be discussed by the Commission at its meeting on May 26, 2026, to determine whether probable cause exists. Following its discussion on May 26, 2026, the Commission adopted a decision at its meeting on June 23, 2026, finding that there are insufficient facts and circumstances pled in the Complaint and in the Written Statement to lead a reasonable person to believe that the Act was violated as alleged in the Complaint.

II. Summary of the Pleadings

A. *The Complaint*

Complainant provides that on or about January 12, 2026, the Superintendent submitted her resignation “directly to” Respondent/Board President. According to Complainant, Respondent “had a clear duty to timely and fully disclose this critical information to all members of the Board,” but instead Respondent “knowingly and intentionally” withheld the resignation from the remainder of the Board, with the exception of the Board Vice President, who she told to keep the information confidential. Complainant notes Respondent “depriv[ed] [the remainder of the Board] of equal access to essential information necessary to fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities.” Complainant further notes “[u]pon information and belief,” Respondent

“withheld this information at the direction and for the benefit of outside special-interest groups that exert influence over her actions and votes as a Board member.” Per Complainant, Respondent’s conduct “constitutes a deliberate misuse of authority, undermines the governance of the Board, and places the district in a compromised position causing irreparable harm.”

Complainant maintains that the Superintendent was not present at the Board’s reorganization meeting on January 6, 2026, and Respondent informed the public and the Board that it was because of a death in the family. Complainant further maintains that the Superintendent was also not present at the next meeting on January 20, and Respondent refused to answer the inquiries from the public and remaining Board members, despite having the resignation letter. According to Complainant, it was not until the Board went into executive session and continued with the inquiries that Respondent informed the Board of the Superintendent’s resignation. Complainant provides that Respondent informed the Board that she “intentionally withheld the resignation” in order to “negotiate with the Superintendent and attempt to persuade her to rescind her resignation.”

With the above in mind, Complainant asserts Respondent violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)* by “knowingly withholding the Superintendent’s resignation and acting independently without Board authority” and by “fail[ing] to act in the best interest of the district and violat[ing] her statutory duties.” Complainant further asserts Respondent violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)* because she “used her position as Board President to control access to critical information and to advance the interests of outside interest groups, thereby securing improper advantages and influence.” Complainant also alleges Respondent violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(e)* by “unilaterally withholding information, negotiating independently, and acting without Board authorization,” and as a result, Respondent usurped the authority of the full Board and violated the requirement that the Board act as a collective body.” Complainant further alleges Respondent violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(g)* because her “intentional deception of Board members and the public, coupled with her refusal to disclose the Superintendent’s resignation, created a clear and justifiable impression that the public trust was violated” and violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(i)* because her “actions undermined transparency, deprived Board members of equal access to information, eroded public confidence, and compromised the integrity of the [Board].”

B. Written Statement

In her Written Statement, Respondent denies the allegations in the Complaint and notes that they contain “Complainant’s opinion without any basis in fact, designed only to give the appearance of unethical conduct without providing any facts to support same.” Respondent argues the “suggestion that [she] used her position for personal gain is also not supported by any facts as to what it is or what that Respondent gained personally nor who it is that she is being controlled by insofar as her actions and voting as a [Board member] is concerned.”

Respondent maintains that she “provided and disclosed the letter of resignation” to the Board at the January 20 meeting. Respondent further maintains she was not required or obligated to forward the resignation letter to each Board member prior to the January 20 meeting. Respondent asserts she did not use “her elected position for personal gain [or] for the benefit of

outside special interest groups, whose interests influence and control her actions, by waiting until January 20.” Respondent notes the Board Vice President is the only other officer and “was entitled to the information in advance” of the meeting, in the event Respondent was unable to attend the meeting. Respondent contends Complainant’s allegations that she withheld the resignation for the benefit of an outside special interest group is “false and lacking in any facts to support same,” the “alleged special interest groups are unnamed, and the alleged influence is undefined as to how and when that was accomplished” and Complainant “failed to indicate how the District was ‘compromised’ and what the ‘irreparable harm’ was/is between the date of Respondent’s receipt of the Superintendent’s letter of resignation and the disclosure of same.”

Respondent notes the Superintendent’s absence at the meetings had nothing to do with Respondent’s role as a Board member. Respondent further notes she was not permitted to speak about the Superintendent in public without having issued her a Rice notice, and it was also a personnel matter, and therefore, it was not because Respondent was using her elected position for personal gain or for the benefit of outside special interest groups. Respondent contends that Complainant did not provide any evidence to support his assertion that Respondent “attempted to negotiate with the Superintendent” and even if she did attempt to persuade the Superintendent to remain beyond her contract, that in and of itself does not violate the Code, nor does it support a personal gain or that is was for the benefit of a special interest group.

Respondent argues the Complaint does not contain any evidence to support any of the alleged violations of the Code and the “suggestion that she knowingly and intentionally withheld critical information from the [Board] is belied by the fact that the information was actually provided to the [Board] [at] a duly advertised meeting and thus not a misuse of her position, a pattern of unethical conduct, abuse of authority” or “disregard for collective governance.” Respondent further argues “the [Board] cannot govern unless there is a Board [m]eeting, which is when the letter of resignation was rightfully and legally disclosed.”

III. Analysis

This matter is before the Commission for a determination of probable cause pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:28-9.7*. A finding of probable cause is not an adjudication on the merits but, rather, an initial review whereupon the Commission makes a preliminary determination as to whether the matter should proceed to an adjudication on the merits, or whether further review is not warranted. Pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:28-9.7(a)*, probable cause “shall be found when the facts and circumstances presented in the complaint and written statement would lead a reasonable person to believe that the Act has been violated.”

Alleged Violations of the Act

Complainant submits that Respondent violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)*, *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)*, *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(e)*, *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(g)* and *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(i)*, and these provisions of the Code provide:

a. I will uphold and enforce all laws, rules and regulations of the State Board of Education, and court orders pertaining to schools. Desired changes shall be brought about only through legal and ethical procedures.

c. I will confine my board action to policy making, planning, and appraisal, and I will help to frame policies and plans only after the board has consulted those who will be affected by them.

e. I will recognize that authority rests with the board of education and will make no personal promises nor take any private action that may compromise the board.

g. I will hold confidential all matters pertaining to the schools which, if disclosed, would needlessly injure individuals or the schools. In all other matters, I will provide accurate information and, in concert with my fellow board members, interpret to the staff the aspirations of the community for its school.

i. I will support and protect school personnel in proper performance of their duties.

Pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:28-6.4(a)*, a violation(s) of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)*, *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)*, *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(e)*, *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(g)* and *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(i)* need to be supported by certain factual evidence, more specifically:

1. Factual evidence of a violation of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)* shall include a copy of a final decision from any court of law or administrative agency of this State demonstrating that Respondent failed to enforce all laws, rules and regulations of the State Board of Education, and/or court orders pertaining to schools or that Respondent brought about changes through illegal or unethical procedures.

3. Factual evidence of a violation of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)* shall include evidence that Respondent took board action to effectuate policies and plans without consulting those affected by such policies and plans, or took action that was unrelated to Respondent's duty to (i) develop the general rules and principles that guide the management of the school district or charter school; (ii) formulate the programs and methods to effectuate the goals of the school district or charter school; or (iii) ascertain the value or liability of a policy.

5. Factual evidence of a violation of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(e)* shall include evidence that Respondent made personal promises or took action beyond the scope of her duties such that, by its nature, had the potential to compromise the board.

7. Factual evidence of a violation of the confidentiality provision of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(g)* shall include evidence that Respondent took action to make

public, reveal or disclose information that was not public under any laws, regulations or court orders of this State, or information that was otherwise confidential in accordance with board policies, procedures or practices. Factual evidence that Respondent violated the inaccurate information provision of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(g) shall include evidence that substantiates the inaccuracy of the information provided by Respondent and evidence that establishes that the inaccuracy was other than reasonable mistake or personal opinion or was not attributable to developing circumstances.

9. Factual evidence of a violation of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(i) shall include evidence that Respondent took deliberate action which resulted in undermining, opposing, compromising or harming school personnel in the proper performance of their duties.

Based on its review, the Commission finds that there are insufficient facts and circumstances presented in the Complaint and the Written Statement to lead a reasonable person to believe that *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(a), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(c), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(e), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(g) and *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(i) were violated. The Commission notes that determinations regarding when or how to share information regarding the resignation of an administrator is a matter of Board governance, and not governed by the Act. Notwithstanding, waiting until executive session of the Board meeting following receipt of the letter of resignation does not appear to be unreasonable. Additionally, the Complaint lacks any evidence that Respondent shared information regarding the Superintendent's resignation with any special interest group. Complainant also speculates that Respondent negotiated to keep the Superintendent without providing any evidence to support those accusations.

As to the alleged violations of the Code, the Commission finds that Complainant has not provided a copy of a final decision from any court of law or other administrative agency demonstrating or specifically finding that Respondent violated a specific law, rule, or regulation of the State Board of Education and/or court orders pertaining to schools, or that she brought about changes through illegal or unethical procedures, as required by *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(a). Regarding a violation of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(c), Complainant fails to demonstrate how Respondent took Board action to effectuate any policy or plan, or how she took action unrelated to her duties when she informed the Board of the Superintendent's resignation during executive session of the following Board meeting. Additionally, as to a violation of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(e), Complainant has not established that Respondent made a personal promise to anyone, or that she took action beyond the scope of her duties that had the potential to compromise the Board as the Complaint does not provide evidence that Respondent negotiated with the Superintendent. Also, as the Complaint fails to provide any evidence that Respondent told any special interest group or other party that the Superintendent planned to resign, a violation of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(g) is not supported. Finally, with respect to a violation of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(i), the Complaint lacks any allegation that Respondent took any action to undermine, oppose, compromise or harm school personnel in any way.

Therefore, and pursuant to *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-9.7(b), the Commission dismisses the alleged violation(s) of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(a), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(c), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(e), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(g) and *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(i).

IV. Decision

In accordance with *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-29(b), and for the reasons detailed herein, the Commission hereby notifies Complainant and Respondent that there are insufficient facts and circumstances pled in the Complaint and in the Written Statement to lead a reasonable person to believe that the Act was violated as alleged in the Complaint and, consequently, dismisses the above-captioned matter. *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-9.7(b).

The within decision is a final decision of an administrative agency and, therefore, it is appealable only to the Superior Court-Appellate Division. *See, New Jersey Court Rule 2:2-3(a)*. Under *New Jersey Court Rule 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.

Robert W. Bender, Chairperson

Mailing Date: June 23, 2026

***Resolution Adopting Decision
in Connection with C13-26***

Whereas, at its meeting on May 26, 2026, the School Ethics Commission (Commission) considered the Complaint and the Written Statement submitted in connection with the above-referenced matter; and

Whereas, at its meeting on May 26, 2026, the Commission discussed finding that the facts and circumstances presented in the Complaint and the Written Statement would not lead a reasonable person to believe that the Act was violated, and therefore, dismissing the above-captioned matter; and

Whereas, at its meeting on June 23, 2026, the Commission reviewed and voted to approve the within decision as accurately memorializing its actions/findings from its meeting on May 26, 2026; and

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

Robert W. Bender, Chairperson

I hereby certify that the Resolution was duly adopted by the School Ethics Commission at its public meeting on June 23, 2026.

Brigid C. Martens, Director
School Ethics Commission