

***Before the School Ethics Commission***  
***Docket No.: T37-21***  
***Decision for Failure to Complete Mandatory Training***  
***Requirement in a Timely Manner***

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***In the Matter of Norma Villanueva,***  
**The Pace Charter School, Mercer County**

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**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 July 27, 2021, directing Respondent, a “board member” 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 her in violation of the Act, for failing to complete training as required by *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-33, *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-4.1, and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:11-3.1(a).

In the OTSC that was served on July 28, 2021, the Commission notified Respondent that she had twenty (20) days to respond to the OTSC, and further advised that failure to respond would be deemed an admission of the facts set forth in the OTSC.<sup>1</sup> 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 material facts 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 in 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.

Respondent is a trustee of The Pace Charter School, located in Mercer County. Pursuant to *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-23.1, the provisions of the Act were made applicable to administrators and members of a board of trustees of a charter school. As a result of her position as a charter school trustee, Respondent is required, pursuant to *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-33, *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-4.1, and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:11-3.1(a), to complete a training program prepared and offered by the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA) on an annual basis. For convenience and ease, the training is offered online so any charter school trustee may complete it at any time, from anywhere. Respondent was required to complete the Governance 4 training program by June 30, 2021.

On July 1, 2021, the NJSBA provided the Commission with the names of those charter school trustees who failed to complete mandated training by June 30, 2021, and the list provided by NJSBA included Respondent. Prior to this time, multiple communications about mandated training

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the ongoing Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, service of process was effectuated by the Commission through electronic transmission only.

were sent to Respondent from NJSBA through a variety of means, including targeted e-mail messages and postings in *School Board Notes*. More specific information detailing the outreach efforts of NJSBA to communicate with Respondent and/or the charter school lead about mandated training is set forth in the attached Certification from NJSBA. *See Exhibit 1*. Notwithstanding all of these communications, Respondent did not complete mandated training.

In addition to the communications from the NJSBA, the Commission's staff also sent electronic correspondence to *all* charter school leads on July 2, 2021, and July 21, 2021, advising that charter school trustees who failed to complete training prior to the Commission's meeting on July 27, 2021, would be the subject of an Order to Show Cause.<sup>2</sup> Again, notwithstanding this correspondence, Respondent did not complete the required training. As a result, an OTSC was issued by the Commission on July 27, 2021, and served on Respondent thereafter.

To date, there is no dispute that Respondent did not complete her required training by June 30, 2021, and did not complete the training prior to the issuance of the Commission's OTSC. After having been served with the OTSC, Respondent completed her training requirement on July 29, 2021, and also filed a response to the Commission's OTSC. In correspondence to the SEC, **Respondent** stated, "I apologize for this oversight, as I was unaware that I was missing a training. Upon notification from your office, I immediately contacted the Superintendent ... who contacted our Board Administrator .... [The Board Administrator] reached out and enrolled me in the training through [NJSBA] on July 29th and I completed the training that day." In correspondence to the SEC, the **Superintendent** stated, "Please accept this letter of confirmation that through no fault of her own, [Respondent] did not receive any notification that she was required to take any additional training once she completed Governance 4 from NJSBA. [Respondent] is one of our most dedicated, and committed members ... I was unaware that members who stay beyond 2 years following their last training had to redo Governance 4. Upon learning this, she was signed up through [NJSBA] and completed it that day." Importantly, Respondent did not deny that she did not complete training in a timely fashion.

### III. Decision/Penalty Recommendation

*N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-4.2(d) provides that school board members and charter school trustees who fail to comply with their training mandate shall be considered in violation of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-33. Based on the record as set forth above, at its special meeting on August 30, 2021, the Commission found that Respondent violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-33, as well as *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-4.1 and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:11-3.1(a). Respondent received repeated notifications of her training requirement, and had ample opportunity to complete the mandated training in a timely fashion; nonetheless, she failed to complete training as required.

In addition, the Commission readily acknowledges and is sympathetic to the fact that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) has had a significant impact on the daily lives of all people, and believes that reasonable accommodations and extensions of deadlines are appropriate and warranted in certain circumstances. However, the Commission notes that training is completed annually, can be completed from any computer or device with an internet connection, and that the Commission was only required to issue an OTSC to thirty-six (36) charter school trustees throughout the State for

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<sup>2</sup> Again, due to the ongoing Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, this communication was also sent via electronic transmission.

failure to comply with the statutory obligation to complete training. As such, there is no reasonable basis for Respondent, based on the current record, to have failed to comply with this mandate.

Where a violation of the Act is found by the Commission, the Commission may recommend to the Commissioner of Education that a penalty be imposed. The recommended penalty can include a reprimand, censure, suspension or removal of the school official. *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 sanction 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.”<sup>3</sup> A copy of any comments filed must be sent to the Commission ([school.ethics@doe.nj.gov](mailto: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 briefs on appeal.

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Robert W. Bender, Chairperson

Mailing Date: August 30, 2021

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<sup>3</sup> An electronic submission may also be sent to [controversiesdisputesfilings@doe.nj.gov](mailto:controversiesdisputesfilings@doe.nj.gov).

**Resolution Adopting Decision for Failure to Complete Mandatory Training  
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**Whereas**, pursuant to *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-23.1, all charter school trustees, including Respondent, are subject to the provisions of the School Ethics Act (Act), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-21 *et seq.*; and

**Whereas**, Norma Villanueva (Respondent) is a charter school trustee of The Pace Charter School; and

**Whereas**, the Act requires Respondent to complete a training program prepared and offered by the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA) on an annual basis; and

**Whereas**, Respondent failed to complete her Governance 4 training program by June 30, 2021; and

**Whereas**, at its meeting on July 27, 2021, the School Ethics Commission (Commission) issued an Order to Show Cause (OTSC) directing Respondent to show cause as to why she failed to complete her mandatory training by June 30, 2021, as required by *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-33, *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-4.1, and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:11-3.1(a); and

**Whereas**, after having been served with the OTSC, Respondent completed her training requirement, and also filed a response to the Commission's OTSC that did not dispute that she did not complete training in a timely fashion; and

**Whereas**, at its special meeting on August 30, 2021, the Commission found that Respondent violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-33, *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-4.1, and *N.J.A.C.* 6A:11-3.1(a) by failing to complete the training requirement she was obligated to complete; and

**Whereas**, at its special meeting on August 30, 2021, the Commission recommended that the Commissioner of Education impose a penalty of reprimand on Respondent; and

**Whereas**, at its special meeting on August 30, 2021, the Commission agreed that the within decision accurately memorializes its findings and recommendations; and

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

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Robert W. Bender, Chairperson  
School Ethics Commission

I certify that the within Resolution was duly adopted by the School Ethics Commission at a special meeting on August 30, 2021.

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Kathryn A. Whalen, Director