

IN THE MATTER OF : NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
THE CERTIFICATES OF : STATE BOARD OF EXAMINERS  
ELIZABETH SONK : ORDER OF REVOCATION  
\_\_\_\_\_ : DOCKET NO: 2021-179

At its meeting of January 21, 2022, the State Board of Examiners (Board) reviewed information it received from the Office of Student Protection and the Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office regarding Elizabeth Sonk (Sonk).

On or about November 22, 2019, Sonk was charged with Computer Crime—Alter/Damage/Disrupt/Impair (2<sup>nd</sup> degree), *N.J.S.A. 2C:20-25(b)*, and Identity Crime—Pretend to be Rep (4<sup>th</sup> degree), *N.J.S.A. 2:21-17(a)(2)*, after she allegedly changed access passwords to her prior employer's business email, disconnected telephone service without authorization, and deleted business files without authorization. On September 1, 2021, Sonk pled guilty to a lesser petty disorderly person offense, Harassment-Communication in Manner to Cause Alarm, *N.J.S.A. 2C:33-4(a)*.

Sonk currently holds a substitute credential which expires on July 1, 2024. Upon review of the above information, the Board voted at its meeting of March 4, 2022 to issue Sonk an Order to Show Cause as to why her certificate should not be revoked.

The Board sent Sonk the Order to Show Cause by regular and certified mail on March 7, 2022. The Order provided that Sonk must file an Answer within 30 days. Sonk filed an Answer on March 28, 2022.

Since there were material facts in dispute, the Board transmitted the matter to the Office of Administrative Law (OAL) for hearing as a contested case on April 12, 2022. On September 7, 2022, the Administrative Law Judge assigned to the case returned it to the Board after Sonk failed to appear for scheduled prehearing conferences on July 19, 2022, and August 31, 2022. Pursuant to *N.J.A.C.* 1:1-3.3, the ALJ provided Sonk with 13 days to submit an explanation for her nonappearance. Sonk did not submit an explanation or otherwise respond to that notice. At its meeting of October 28, 2022, the Board voted to retain the matter.

On December 7, 2022, the Board sent Sonk a notice by regular and certified mail providing her with an additional 15 days to respond before her Answer would be stricken from the record and the allegations in the Order to Show Cause would be deemed admitted. Sonk failed to respond so her answer was stricken from the record and the allegations in the Order to Show Cause were deemed admitted.

Thereafter, pursuant to *N.J.A.C.* 6A:9B-4.6(e), on July 28, 2023, the Board sent Sonk a hearing notice by regular and certified mail, as well as by email. The certified mail receipt was returned as “unclaimed”, and the regular mail copy was not returned. Sonk 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 her certificate. Sonk was also offered the opportunity to appear before the Board to provide testimony on the sanction issue. The Board sent a second notice to Sonk on August 30, 2023, by

regular and certified mail. The certified mail receipt was returned as “unclaimed”, and the regular mail copy was not returned. Sonk did not respond.

The threshold issue before the Board in this matter is whether Sonk’s conduct in changing the access passwords to her prior employer’s business email, disconnecting telephone service without authorization, and deleting business files without authorization constitutes conduct unbecoming a certificate holder or other just cause. Since Sonk did not appear at her hearings, and her Answer was subsequently stricken from the record, at its meeting of December 8, 2023, the Board considered only the allegations in the Order to Show Cause. Moreover, since Sonk is deemed to have failed to file an Answer, the allegations contained in the Order to Show Cause are deemed admitted. *N.J.A.C. 6A:9B-4.6(c)*. Thus, since no material facts related to Sonk’s conduct are in dispute, 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 Sonk engaged in unbecoming conduct.

The Board must now determine whether Sonk’s conduct, as set forth in the Order to Show Cause, represents just cause to act against her certificate pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:9B-4.4*. The Board finds that they do.

The Commissioner’s long-standing belief is 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, Sonk's actions in changing the access passwords to her prior employer's business email, disconnecting telephone service and deleting business files without authorization falls far short of a role model. Accordingly, the Board believes that the only appropriate sanction in this case is the revocation of her certificate.

Accordingly, on December 8, 2023, the Board voted to revoke Elizabeth Sonk's substitute credential. On this 19<sup>th</sup> day of January 2024, the Board voted to adopt its formal written decision and it is therefore ORDERED that Sonk's credential be revoked effective immediately. It is further ORDERED that Sonk return her credential 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.

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Rani Singh, Secretary  
State Board of Examiners

RS/LF

**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.