



Teaching
Regulation
Agency

Mr Gethin Hughes Bridge: Professional conduct panel meeting outcome

**Panel decision and reasons on behalf of the
Secretary of State for Education**

January 2019

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Professional conduct panel decision and recommendations, and decision on behalf of the Secretary of State

Teacher: Mr Gethin Hughes Bridge

Teacher ref number: 9541567

Teacher date of birth: 9 November 1970

TRA reference: 17154

Date of determination: 3 January 2019

Former employer: Winchcombe School, Gloucestershire

A. Introduction

A professional conduct panel (“the panel”) of the Teaching Regulation Agency (“the TRA”) convened on 3 January 2019 at Cheylesmore House, 5 Quinton Road, Coventry, CV1 2WT to consider the case of Mr Gethin Hughes Bridge .

The panel members were Mr John Pemberton (former teacher panellist – in the chair), Mrs Alison Walsh (teacher panellist) and Mr Anthony Greenwood (lay panellist).

The legal adviser to the panel was Mr Graham Miles of Blake Morgan LLP solicitors.

In advance of the meeting, the TRA agreed to a request from Mr Gethin Hughes Bridge that the allegations be considered without a hearing after taking into consideration the public interest and the interests of justice. Mr Bridge provided a signed statement of agreed facts and admitted unacceptable professional conduct and conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute. The panel considered the case at a meeting without the attendance of the presenting officer, Mr Bridge or his representative.

The meeting took place in private, save for the announcement of the panel’s decision, which was announced in public and recorded.

B. Allegations

The panel considered the allegations set out in the Notice of Meeting dated 10 December 2018.

It was alleged that Mr Gethin Hughes Bridge was guilty of unacceptable professional conduct and/or conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute, in that he:

1. Failed to observe appropriate professional boundaries in relation to Pupil A, including by:
 - a) exchanging personal contact information with her;
 - b) exchanging messages with Pupil A, including:
 - i. which were sent late at night;
 - ii. in which he told Pupil A that he loved her;
 - iii. in which he told Pupil A that he missed her and/or was thinking of her;
 - iv. in which he stated that Pupil A could live with him;
 - v. in which he called Pupil A beautiful;
 - vi. in which he discussed pupils and/or other members of staff at the School;
 - vii. in which he stated that he was "mesmerised" watching Pupil A and "struggled to take [his] eyes off [her]";
 - viii. in which he stated that Pupil A had "gorgeous legs";
 - ix. in which he stated that he "want[ed] to trail kisses on [Pupil A]";
 - x. in which he stated that he did "want [Pupil A] to be here very badly!";
 - xi. in which he stated "I wish you were here so that as you do start to drift away I can linger on the contours of your face, tuck a stray lock of hair behind your ear and kiss you softly. And you will be loved";
 - xii. in which he stated "I imagined you this morning with your hair spilling over the pillow, watching me, looking for a story. The thought made skin tingle and that deep, soft, gentle shiver ran through me."
 - xiii. in which he included a 'love heart' picture.
2. Failed to observe appropriate professional boundaries in relation to Pupil B, including by:

- a) exchanging personal contact information with her;
 - b) exchanging messages with Pupil B, including one or more messages:
 - i. which were sent late at night;
 - ii. in which he included the 'love heart' picture;
 - iii. in which he stated that he had missed Pupil B "more than [he] thought possible...";
 - iv. in which he discussed other members of staff at the School.
3. His conduct as may be found proven at 1 and/or 2 above was:
- a) flirtatious;
 - b) conduct of a sexual nature and/or sexually motivated;

Mr Bridge admitted the alleged facts.

Mr Bridge also admitted that his conduct amounted to unacceptable professional conduct and conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute.

C. Summary of evidence

Documents

In advance of the meeting, the panel received a bundle of documents which included:

Section 1: Chronology – page 1

Section 2: Notice of Referral, Response and Notice of Meeting – pages 2 to 8c

Section 3: Statement of Agreed Facts and Presenting Officer's Representations – pages 9 to 28

Section 4: Teaching Regulation Agency documents – pages 29 to 50

Section 5: Teacher documents – pages 51 to 58

The panel members confirmed that they had read all of the documents in advance of the meeting.

Statement of agreed facts

The panel considered a statement of agreed facts which was signed by Mr Bridge on 15 October 2018.

D. Decision and reasons

The panel announced its decision and reasons as follows:

The panel has carefully considered the case and reached a decision.

The panel confirms that it has read all the documents provided in the bundle in advance of the meeting.

In advance of the meeting, the TRA agreed to a request from Mr Bridge that the allegations be considered without a hearing. The panel has the ability to direct that the case be considered at a hearing if required in the interests of justice or in the public interest. The panel did not determine that such a direction is necessary or appropriate in this case.

Mr Gethin Hughes Bridge was employed as a geography and history teacher at Winchcombe School, Gloucestershire ("the School") until his dismissal on 17 April 2018.

On various dates between August 2017 and December 2017, Mr Bridge exchanged emails with Pupil A and Pupil B, who were two former pupils of the School. Both pupils had previously been taught by Mr Bridge but had left the School to go to [Redacted], Evesham by the time that the exchanges of emails commenced. Concerns were raised by the safeguarding lead at [Redacted] following disclosures made by the two pupils about their former teacher at Winchcombe School. The safeguarding lead immediately brought these concerns to the attention of Winchcombe School.

When the exchange of emails came to the attention of the School, disciplinary proceedings were commenced that resulted in Mr Bridge's dismissal.

Mr Bridge has admitted the alleged facts and also signed a Statement of Agreed Facts

Findings of fact

The panel's findings of fact are as follows:

It was alleged that you are guilty of unacceptable professional conduct and/or conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute, in that you:

- 1. Failed to observe appropriate professional boundaries in relation to Pupil A, including by:**
 - a) exchanging personal contact information with her;**
 - b) exchanging messages with Pupil A, including:**
 - i. which were sent late at night;**
 - ii. in which you told Pupil A that you loved her;**

- iii. in which you told Pupil A that you missed her and/or were thinking of her;
- iv. in which you stated that Pupil A could live with you;
- v. in which you called Pupil A beautiful;
- vi. in which you discussed pupils and/or other members of staff at the School;
- vii. in which you state that you were "mesmerised" watching Pupil A and "struggled to take my eyes off you";
- viii. in which you state that Pupil A had "gorgeous legs";
- ix. in which you state that he "want to trail kisses on [Pupil A]";
- x. in which you state that you "do want [Pupil A] to be here very badly!";
- xi. in which you state "I wish you were here so that as you do start to drift away I can linger on the contours of your face, tuck a stray lock of hair behind your ear and kiss you softly. And you will be loved";
- xii. in which you state "I imagined you this morning with your hair spilling over the pillow, watching me, looking for a story. The thought made skin tingle and that deep, soft, gentle shiver ran through me."
- xiii. in which you included a 'love heart' picture.

Mr Bridge has admitted each of the factual particulars in 1a and 1b i to xiii and that he failed to maintain appropriate professional boundaries in relation to Pupil A. The panel has also been presented with copies of emails confirming the alleged contents of the emails between Mr Bridge and Pupil A, which were samples of approximately 800 emails.

The panel finds allegations 1a and 1 b i to xiii proved.

- 2. **Failed to observe appropriate professional boundaries in relation to Pupil B, including by:**
 - a) exchanging personal contact information with her;
 - b) exchanging messages with Pupil B, including one or more messages:
 - i. which were sent late at night;
 - ii. in which you included a 'love heart' picture;

iii. in which you stated that you had missed Pupil B "more than [you] thought possible...";

iv. in which you discussed other members of staff at the School.

Mr Bridge has admitted each of the factual particulars in 2a and 2b i to iv and that he failed to maintain appropriate professional boundaries in relation to Pupil B. The panel has also been presented with copies of the emails confirming the alleged contents of the emails between Mr Bridge and Pupil B.

The panel finds allegations 2a and b i to iv proved.

3. Your conduct as may be found proven at 1 and/or 2 above was:

a) flirtatious;

b) conduct of a sexual nature and/or sexually motivated;

Mr Bridge has admitted the facts alleged in 3a and 3b.

The panel is satisfied that the emails were flirtatious.

As to sexual motivation, in the Statement of Agreed Facts, Mr Bridge has admitted that his conduct in allegations 1 and 2 amounted to conduct of a sexual nature and/or was conduct which was sexually motivated. The panel accepted the legal advice, based on the judgment in **Sait v GMC [2018] EWHC 3160** (Admin) at paragraph 36, that: 'A sexual motive means that the conduct was done either in pursuit of sexual gratification or in pursuit of a future sexual relationship'.

The panel is satisfied that Mr Bridge's conduct in relation to both pupils was for the purposes of sexual gratification, but not necessarily in pursuit of a future sexual relationship with either pupil. Mr Bridge has admitted that he was flattered by the attention and, based on the content of the emails, the panel is satisfied that the emails were sent by Mr Bridge for the purposes of his sexual gratification. The panel finds that the conduct was sexually motivated on that basis.

The panel, therefore, finds allegations 3a and 3b proved

Findings as to unacceptable professional conduct and/or conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute

Having found the allegations to have been proven, the panel has gone on to consider whether the facts of those proven allegations amount to unacceptable professional conduct and/or conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute.

Mr Bridge has admitted unacceptable professional conduct and conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute. The panel has taken these admissions into account, but made its own determinations.

In doing so, the panel has had regard to the document Teacher Misconduct: The Prohibition of Teachers, which the panel refers to as “the Advice”.

The panel is satisfied that the conduct of Mr Bridge in relation to the facts found proven, involved breaches of the Teachers’ Standards. The panel considers that by reference to Part Two, Mr Bridge is in breach of the following standards:

- Teachers uphold public trust in the profession and maintain high standards of ethics and behaviour, within and outside school, by
 - treating pupils with dignity, building relationships rooted in mutual respect, and at all times observing proper boundaries appropriate to a teacher’s professional position;
 - having regard for the need to safeguard pupils’ well-being, in accordance with statutory provisions;
- Teachers must have an understanding of, and always act within, the statutory frameworks which set out their professional duties and responsibilities.

The panel has also considered whether Mr Bridge's conduct displayed behaviours associated with any of the offences listed on pages 8 and 9 of the Advice and the panel has found that none of these offences are relevant.

The panel is satisfied that the conduct of Mr Bridge was misconduct of a serious nature which fell significantly short of the standards expected of the profession.

Accordingly, the panel is satisfied that Mr Bridge is guilty of unacceptable professional conduct.

The panel has taken into account how the teaching profession is viewed by others and considered the influence that teachers may have on pupils, parents and others in the community. The panel has taken account of the uniquely influential role that teachers can hold in pupils’ lives and that pupils must be able to view teachers as role models in the way they behave.

The panel therefore finds that Mr Bridge's actions constitute conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute.

Panel’s recommendation to the Secretary of State

Given the panel’s findings in respect of unacceptable professional conduct and conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute, it is necessary for the panel to go on to

consider whether it would be appropriate to recommend the imposition of a prohibition order by the Secretary of State.

In considering whether to recommend to the Secretary of State that a prohibition order should be made, the panel has to consider whether it is an appropriate and proportionate measure, and whether it is in the public interest to do so. Prohibition orders should not be given in order to be punitive, or to show that blame has been apportioned, although they are likely to have punitive effect.

The panel had regard to the particular public interest considerations set out in the Advice and having done so has found a number of them to be relevant in this case, namely the protection of pupils, the maintenance of public confidence in the profession and declaring and upholding proper standards of conduct.

There is a strong public interest consideration in respect of the protection of pupils given the serious findings of failing to maintain appropriate professional boundaries and engaging in sexually motivated conduct.

Similarly, the panel considers that public confidence in the profession could be seriously weakened if conduct such as that found against Mr Bridge were not treated with the utmost seriousness when regulating the conduct of the profession.

The panel considered that a strong public interest consideration in declaring proper standards of conduct in the profession was also present as the conduct found against Mr Bridge was outside that which could reasonably be tolerated.

Notwithstanding the clear public interest factors that were present, the panel considered carefully whether or not it would be proportionate to impose a prohibition order taking into account the effect that this would have on Mr Bridge.

In carrying out the balancing exercise the panel has considered the public interest considerations both in favour of and against prohibition as well as the interests of Mr Bridge. The panel took further account of the Advice, which suggests that a prohibition order may be appropriate if certain behaviours of a teacher have been proven. In the list of such behaviours, those that are relevant in this case are:

- serious departure from the personal and professional conduct elements of the Teachers' Standards;
- misconduct seriously affecting the education and/or well-being of pupils, and particularly where there is a continuing risk;
- abuse of position or trust;
- sexual misconduct, eg involving actions that were sexually motivated or of a sexual nature and/or that use or exploit the trust, knowledge or influence derived from the individual's professional position;

Even though there were behaviours that would point to a prohibition order being appropriate, the panel went on to consider whether or not there were sufficient mitigating factors to militate against a prohibition order being an appropriate and proportionate measure to impose, particularly taking into account the nature and severity of the behaviour in this case.

Given the very large number of emails sent by Mr Bridge, his actions were clearly deliberate. There is no evidence that he was acting under duress. However, Mr Bridge states that at the time of the proven conduct, he was at a low point in his personal life [Redacted].

The panel has not been presented with any evidence demonstrating Mr Bridge's character or previous good history or otherwise. However the panel noted that Mr Bridge has indicated remorse for his actions. Mr Bridge has stated: 'I still do not fully understand why I behaved in the way that I did...' The panel has taken this to suggest limited insight into his behaviour.

The panel first considered whether it would be proportionate to conclude this case with no recommendation of prohibition, considering whether the publication of the findings made by the panel is sufficient.

The panel is of the view that applying the standard of the ordinary intelligent citizen recommending no prohibition order is not a proportionate and appropriate response. Recommending that publication of adverse findings is sufficient in the case would unacceptably compromise the public interest considerations present in this case, despite the severity of consequences for the teacher of prohibition.

The panel is of the view that prohibition is both proportionate and appropriate. The panel has decided that the public interest considerations outweigh the interests of Mr Bridge. The large volume of emails, some sent very late at night and the sexual motivation were significant factors in forming that opinion. Accordingly, the panel makes a recommendation to the Secretary of State that a prohibition order should be imposed with immediate effect.

The panel went on to consider whether or not it would be appropriate to recommend that a review period of the order should be considered. The panel was mindful that a prohibition order applies for life, but there may be circumstances in any given case that may make it appropriate to allow a teacher to apply to have the prohibition order reviewed after a specified period of time that may not be less than two years.

The Advice indicates that there are behaviours that, if proven, would militate against a review period being recommended. These behaviours include serious sexual misconduct, e.g. where the act was sexually motivated and resulted in or had the potential to result in, harm to a person or persons, particularly where the individual has used their professional position to influence or exploit a person or persons.

The panel felt the findings indicated a situation in which a review period would not be appropriate and as such decided that it would be proportionate in all the circumstances for the prohibition order to be recommended without provision for a review period.

Decision and reasons on behalf of the Secretary of State

I have given very careful consideration to this case and to the recommendation of the panel in respect of both sanction and review period.

In considering this case, I have also given very careful attention to the Advice that the Secretary of State has published concerning the prohibition of teachers.

In this case, the panel has found all of the allegations proven and found that those proven facts amount to unacceptable professional conduct and conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute.

The panel has made a recommendation to the Secretary of State that Mr Bridge should be the subject of a prohibition order, with no provision for a review period.

In particular, the panel has found that Mr Bridge is in breach of the following standards:

- Teachers uphold public trust in the profession and maintain high standards of ethics and behaviour, within and outside school, by
 - treating pupils with dignity, building relationships rooted in mutual respect, and at all times observing proper boundaries appropriate to a teacher's professional position;
 - having regard for the need to safeguard pupils' well-being, in accordance with statutory provisions;
- Teachers must have an understanding of, and always act within, the statutory frameworks which set out their professional duties and responsibilities.

The findings of misconduct are particularly serious as they include a finding of sexual misconduct.

I have to determine whether the imposition of a prohibition order is proportionate and in the public interest. In considering that for this case, I have considered the overall aim of a prohibition order which is to protect pupils and to maintain public confidence in the profession. I have considered the extent to which a prohibition order in this case would achieve that aim taking into account the impact that it will have on the individual teacher. I have also asked myself, whether a less intrusive measure, such as the published finding of unacceptable professional conduct and conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute, would itself be sufficient to achieve the overall aim. I have to consider

whether the consequences of such a publication are themselves sufficient. I have considered therefore whether or not prohibiting Mr Bridge, and the impact that will have on him, is proportionate and in the public interest.

In this case, I have considered the extent to which a prohibition order would protect children. The panel has observed, “Mr Bridge has admitted that his conduct in allegations 1 and 2 amounted to conduct of a sexual nature and/or was conduct which was sexually motivated.” A prohibition order would therefore reduce the risk of Mr Bridge from communicating with pupils in such a way from being present in the future. I have also taken into account the panel’s comments on insight and remorse, which the panel sets out as follows, “ the panel noted that Mr Bridge has indicated remorse for his actions. Mr Bridge has stated: 'I still do not fully understand why I behaved in the way that I did...’ The panel has taken this to suggest limited insight into his behaviour.”

In my judgement, the lack of full insight means that there is some risk of the repetition of this behaviour and this puts at risk the future well-being of pupils. I have therefore given this element considerable weight in reaching my decision.

I have gone on to consider the extent to which a prohibition order would maintain public confidence in the profession. The panel observe that it, “has taken account of the uniquely influential role that teachers can hold in pupils’ lives and that pupils must be able to view teachers as role models in the way they behave.”

I am particularly mindful of the finding of sexual misconduct in this case and the impact that such a finding has on the reputation of the profession.

I have had to consider that the public has a high expectation of professional standards of all teachers and that the public might regard a failure to impose a prohibition order as a failure to uphold those high standards. In weighing these considerations, I have had to consider the matter from the point of view of an “ordinary intelligent and well-informed citizen.”

I have considered whether the publication of a finding of unacceptable professional conduct, in the absence of a prohibition order, can itself be regarded by such a person as being a proportionate response to the misconduct that has been found proven in this case.

I have also considered the impact of a prohibition order on Mr Bridge himself. The panel say that it, “has not been presented with any evidence demonstrating Mr Bridge's character or previous good history or otherwise.”

A prohibition order would prevent Mr Bridge from teaching and would also clearly deprive the public of his contribution to the profession for the period that it is in force.

In this case, I have placed considerable weight on the panel's comments concerning the seriousness of the behaviour, "The large volume of emails, some sent very late at night and the sexual motivation were significant factors in forming that opinion."

I have given less weight in my consideration of sanction therefore, to the contribution that Mr Bridge has made to the profession. In my view, it is necessary to impose a prohibition order in order to maintain public confidence in the profession. A published decision that is not backed up by full insight, does not in my view satisfy the public interest requirement concerning public confidence in the profession.

For these reasons, I have concluded that a prohibition order is proportionate and in the public interest in order to achieve the intended aims of a prohibition order.

I have gone on to consider the matter of a review period. In this case, the panel has recommended that no provision should be made for a review period.

I have considered the panel's comments " there are behaviours that, if proven, would militate against a review period being recommended. These behaviours include serious sexual misconduct, e.g. where the act was sexually motivated and resulted in or had the potential to result in, harm to a person or persons, particularly where the individual has used their professional position to influence or exploit a person or persons."

I have considered whether allowing for no review period reflects the seriousness of the findings and is proportionate to achieve the aim of maintaining public confidence in the profession. In this case, three factors mean that allowing for no review is proportionate. These elements are the sexual misconduct found, the lack of full insight and the large volume of e-mails sent late at night.

I consider therefore that allowing for no review period is necessary to maintain public confidence and is proportionate and in the public interest.

This means that Mr Gethin Hughes Bridge is prohibited from teaching indefinitely and cannot teach in any school, sixth form college, relevant youth accommodation or children's home in England. Furthermore, in view of the seriousness of the allegations found proved against him, I have decided that Mr Gethin Hughes Bridge shall not be entitled to apply for restoration of his eligibility to teach.

This order takes effect from the date on which it is served on the teacher.

Mr Gethin Hughes Bridge has a right of appeal to the Queen's Bench Division of the High Court within 28 days from the date he is given notice of this order.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'AL C M' followed by a flourish.

Decision maker: Alan Meyrick

Date: 8 January 2019

This decision is taken by the decision maker named above on behalf of the Secretary of State.