



Teaching
Regulation
Agency

Mrs Sarah Aldridge: Professional conduct panel outcome

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

January 2025

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

Teacher: Mrs Sarah Aldridge

Teacher ref number: 0056847

Teacher date of birth: 17 July 1976

TRA reference: 18298

Date of determination: 10 January 2025

Former employer: Abington Vale Primary School, Northampton

Introduction

A professional conduct panel ('the panel') of the Teaching Regulation Agency ('the TRA') convened on 4, 5, 7 and 8 November (6 November being a non-sitting day), at Cheylesmore House, 5 Quinton Road, Coventry, CV1 2WT, and on 11 November 2024 and 9 and 10 January 2025 via Microsoft Teams, to consider the case of Mrs Sarah Aldridge.

The panel members were Ms Amanda Godfrey (teacher panellist – in the chair), Ms Emma Billings (lay panellist) and Ms Olivia Kong (lay panellist).

The legal adviser to the panel in November 2024 was Ms Abigail Reynolds of Birketts LLP solicitors and Abigail Trencher of Birketts LLP on 9 and 10 January 2025.

The presenting officer for the TRA was Mr Mark Millin, instructed by Kingsley Napley LLP.

Mrs Aldridge was present and was represented by Mr Jonathan Storey of Cornwall Street Barristers.

The hearing took place in public (save for parts which were heard in private) and was recorded.

Allegations

The panel considered the allegations set out in the notice of proceedings dated 11 July 2024.

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

1. On one or more unknown dates in 2016, she sent one or more communications of a sexual nature using [REDACTED] to one or more children who she knew or ought to have known were around 16 years old;
2. On an unknown date in 2016, she sent an image of a sexual nature to one or more children who she knew or ought to have known were around 16 years old;
3. On an unknown date in 2016, when asked by a 16 year old via [REDACTED] what age you were, she said she was 17;
4. By her conduct as set out in allegation 3, she:
 - a) Was dishonest; and
 - b) Failed to act with integrity
5. Her behaviour as may be found proven above at allegation 1 and/or allegation 2 and/or allegation 3 was sexually motivated.

Mrs Aldridge denied the allegations as set out in the response to the notice of proceedings signed by Mr Tom Delvin on behalf of Mrs Aldridge on 19 September 2024.

Summary of evidence

Documents

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

- Section 1: Chronology and List of Key People – pages 9 to 11
- Section 2: Notice of Hearing and Response – pages 12 to 21
- Section 3: TRA Witness Statements – pages 22 to 40
- Section 4: TRA Documents – pages 41 to 588
- Section 5a: Teacher Documents 1 – pages 589 to 735.

- Section 5b: Teacher Documents 2 – pages 736 – 838
- Section 5c: Teacher Statement – pages 839 – 864

In addition, and in advance of the hearing, the panel was provided with the TRA's skeleton submissions consisting of 18 pages.

The panel also agreed to accept the following:

- Extract of the witness statement of Witness B [REDACTED] – 1 page

The panel members confirmed that they had read all of the documents within the bundle, in advance of the hearing and the additional document that the panel decided to admit.

Witnesses

The panel heard oral evidence from the following witnesses called by the TRA:

- Witness A
- Witness B

The panel also heard oral evidence from Mrs Aldridge.

Decision and reasons

The panel announced its decision and reasons as follows:

The panel carefully considered the case before it and reached a decision.

In September 2014, Mrs Aldridge commenced employment at Abington Vale Primary School ('the School'), part of the Northampton Primary Academy Trust ('the Trust').

In around 2016, messages were allegedly sent to male children aged around 15 or 16 from a [REDACTED] in the name of "[REDACTED]". The individual sending the messages claimed to be 17 years old.

On 19 August 2018, [REDACTED], Individual A, reported safeguarding concerns regarding Mrs Aldridge to the School. The LADO was informed of the allegations on 20 August 2018.

On 23 August 2018, Mrs Aldridge was suspended from her position at the School pending an investigation into the allegations.

Northamptonshire Police commenced an investigation into the allegations against Mrs Aldridge and later referred the matter to the TRA on 5 April 2019. However, no further action was taken by the police against Mrs Aldridge.

An independent investigation was commissioned by the Trust on 25 June 2019.

Findings of fact

The findings of fact are as follows:

- 1. On one or more unknown dates in 2016, you sent one or more communications of a sexual nature using [REDACTED] to one or more children who you knew or ought to have known were around 16 years old;**

The panel considered the written and oral evidence of Witness B, who stated that, on 19 August 2018, Individual A sent an email to Individual B [REDACTED], raising complaints about professional misconduct relating to Mrs Aldridge. Individual A, [REDACTED], alleged that between May 2016 and September 2016, Mrs Aldridge had created “[REDACTED]” in which she had adopted the identity of a 17-year-old girl called ‘[REDACTED]’. Individual A alleged that, during this period, Mrs Aldridge communicated with a number of boys aged 15 and 16 years old. Individual A alleged that Mrs Aldridge “*engaged in dialogue with them that became ‘sexting’ in nature and often resulted in the exchange of naked pictures*”. Individual A attached screenshots from the ‘[REDACTED]’ account which he alleged represented messages sent by Mrs Aldridge. Individual A stated that, in addition to these screenshots, he had “*text dialogue*” in which he alleged that Mrs Aldridge admitted “*sexting*” these boys and exchanging naked pictures, which he would provide in due course.

Witness B’s evidence was that she was informed of the allegations on 20 August 2018. On 23 August 2018, Witness B met with Mrs Aldridge. Witness B stated that, during this meeting, Mrs Aldridge informed her that she had a [REDACTED] which contained evidence that Individual A was a “*threatening and harassing character and had promised to ruin her career*”, although the panel was not provided with any extracts from any [REDACTED] which indicated such behaviour.

Witness B stated that she believed she was informed by the police that Individual A was subsequently arrested in relation to his conduct towards Mrs Aldridge. Witness B recalled that, prior to meeting Mrs Aldridge on 23 August 2018, she was made aware that Individual A [REDACTED]. Witness B was informed that, prior to Individual A doing so, he had provided a copy of screenshots from the ‘[REDACTED]’ [REDACTED] to Individual B.

Witness B recalled that she was later informed that Individual A had contacted Individual B in January 2018, attempting to report concerns about an unidentified staff member of the Trust. However, Individual A later withdrew the complaint, stating that the staff

member was not part of the Trust. The panel was provided with a copy of this email, dated 29 January 2018, in which Individual A alleged that a teacher at the Trust had, [REDACTED], engaged in *“sexting, grooming and inciting 16 year old boys into sexual acts.”* The email alleged that the staff member, who was not identified, had sent two boys *“explicit”* photographs of herself. The email stated that Individual A had evidence from a [REDACTED] and saved text messages in which the staff member admitted her conduct.

Witness B stated that she was aware that Mrs Aldridge had admitted to the police that she had sent one message to a boy she believed to be 16 years old. However, Witness B understood that Mrs Aldridge stated that the message was sent under duress, and that Individual A had forced her to send the message. An extract from a previous witness statement of Witness B confirmed that, during Witness B’s meeting with Mrs Aldridge on 23 August 2018, Mrs Aldridge had informed her that Individual A had *“commandeered”* an old [REDACTED] belonging to Mrs Aldridge. The statement further recorded that Mrs Aldridge informed Witness B that Individual A had *“attempted to threaten [Mrs Aldridge] into sending an inappropriate message from the [REDACTED] to someone he claimed was [REDACTED] of his 16 year old [REDACTED]”*. Mrs Aldridge informed Witness B that, when she refused, Individual A threatened her [REDACTED]. Further, Mrs Aldridge informed Witness B that Individual A was harassing her and *“wanted to ruin her career”*.

Witness B recalled that the police, having reviewed information provided, commented that there were over 27 messages sent to boys aged 15 and 16 years old. However, Witness B confirmed that the police did not share any documentation with the School in relation to their investigation, and that the police decided to take no further action against Mrs Aldridge. Further, in her oral evidence, Witness B confirmed that, whilst she believed there was reference to 27 messages during a Joint Evaluation Meeting (‘JEM’), this was not recorded in the written notes of the meeting.

In her oral evidence, Witness B recalled her attendance at three JEMs which the panel understood involved meetings between representatives of the Trust, the local authority and the police. Witness B stated that, during these meetings, she became aware that a [REDACTED] had been created, but that no conclusion was reached as to who created the [REDACTED].

Witness B further confirmed to the panel that, despite a review of Mrs Aldridge’s work devices by the Trust’s IT department, there was no evidence of any [REDACTED] communications with children.

The panel was provided with copies of screenshots taken from a [REDACTED] in the name of ‘[REDACTED]’. The panel understood that these were provided by Individual A to Individual B alongside his email of 29 August 2018 referred to above in support of his allegation against Mrs Aldridge.

The panel considered the following [REDACTED] messages (‘the [REDACTED] Messages’), sent by ‘[REDACTED]’, in particular:

- *“I get turned on when I talk to you and miss you when we aren’t chatting so yes I fancy yoy [sic]”*
- *“Hi are you interested in girls. You’re cute”*
- *“Have u had sex? If so what’s it like? Sorry didn’t mean to be personal”*
- *“I want your cock”*
- *“Would you mind if I was older... I’m a bit older”*
- *“I’m. 38... i want to show u what good sex is”*
- *“Do you get *ahem* aroused when you think of/talk to me?”*
- In response to a message saying *“16 wbu”*, the words *“17... am I too old??”*

The panel noted that the [REDACTED] was in the name of ‘[REDACTED]’ and that the [REDACTED] was of an unidentified female.

The panel was also provided with a number of screenshots of a number of undated text messages allegedly sent by Mrs Aldridge to Individual A. The panel noted that the text messages appeared to contain an admission by Mrs Aldridge to Individual A that she had been *“sexting”* teenage boys and that this was a *“huge mistake”*.

The panel understood that screenshots of these text messages were located by Individual A [REDACTED] on a hard drive found shortly after Individual A [REDACTED] and subsequently provided to the police. However, it was unclear to the panel what evidence, if any, was found following a search by the police of Mrs Aldridge’s personal devices relating to either the [REDACTED] messages or the text messages referred to above.

The panel considered the written and oral evidence of Witness A who was commissioned by the Trust to investigate the allegations against Mrs Aldridge.

Witness A confirmed that, on 9 September 2019, she interviewed Mrs Aldridge in respect of the allegations. Witness A’s evidence was that, during this meeting, Mrs Aldridge admitted sending a message to one child who was 16 years of age.

Witness A stated that, during this meeting, Mrs Aldridge provided further details of [REDACTED]. Mrs Aldridge disclosed that [REDACTED] Mrs Aldridge informed Witness A that [REDACTED], and that he had coerced her into sending the message to the child who was 16 years of age.

Witness A recalled that Mrs Aldridge provided her with a number of emails and text messages from Individual A which Mrs Aldridge wished to rely upon in support of her allegation that Individual A engaged in [REDACTED]. However, it was Witness A evidence that Mrs Aldridge only provided her with certain emails and specific texts, which were redacted by Mrs Aldridge. Further, Witness A stated that Mrs Aldridge “*never provided the entirety of the email chains or text message chains, so the evidence she was provided was selective and could not be read in context*”, leading Witness A to conclude that she “*was not comfortable that [she] could see the whole picture and the [REDACTED]*”.

Witness A evidence was that, on 30 September 2019, Mrs Aldridge provided further text messages and emails from Individual A, along with a screenshot which appeared to indicate that 16,000 blocked text messages were sent to Mrs Aldridge by Individual A.

In her oral evidence, Witness A confirmed that Mrs Aldridge had informed her throughout the investigation that Individual A had behaved in a way which was [REDACTED].

The panel considered the written and oral evidence of Mrs Aldridge. Mrs Aldridge admitted that, in 2016, she sent a single message to an individual she was informed was [REDACTED] which stated words to the effect of “[REDACTED]” Mrs Aldridge stated that she could not confirm who the recipient was but that she had been informed that Individual A had told her it [REDACTED], and that she knew that [REDACTED] was 16 at the material time. Mrs Aldridge admitted that she was told the individual was 16 years old and admitted that the message was sent via [REDACTED].

The panel understood that it was undisputed that the ‘[REDACTED]’ [REDACTED] was linked to an email account belonging to Mrs Aldridge. In respect of this [REDACTED], Mrs Aldridge denied sending the [REDACTED] messages referred to within the relevant screenshots, stating that she had not seen these messages until she was provided with the TRA’s bundle of documents in 2023.

It was Mrs Aldridge’s evidence that the ‘[REDACTED]’ [REDACTED] stemmed from a second, dormant [REDACTED] that she had created in her own name in September 2014. Mrs Aldridge’s evidence was that she believed that this second [REDACTED] had been ‘hacked’ by Individual A, with Individual A turning the account into the ‘[REDACTED]’ [REDACTED] to which this allegation relates. In support of this assertion, Mrs Aldridge referred to an email sent by Individual A dated 19 October 2014 (‘the 2014 Email’), which the panel understood was sent prior to the [REDACTED]. The email stated as follows:

“...just some more friendly advice, having [REDACTED] as a password to all your accounts is another rookie error, it is so easy to guess and you leave yourself wide open to people accessing your accounts and doing goodness knows what with them...”

It was Mrs Aldridge's position that this evidenced that Individual A was aware of Mrs Aldridge's passwords, and able to access her accounts, as early as October 2014.

The panel was also provided with a copy of Individual A's police interview in which he admitted having access to the '[REDACTED]' [REDACTED].

Mrs Aldridge recalled that, [REDACTED], Individual A informed her that he had created a [REDACTED] in order to message [REDACTED] as he had concerns about [REDACTED]. Mrs Aldridge stated that she only suspected that Individual A had used a dormant account of Mrs Aldridge's to do so when she discussed the allegations with the police.

Mrs Aldridge referred the panel to a number of communications which she stated were sent by Individual A. The panel was referred, in particular, to a number of communications which took place between 28 and 29 January 2018. The panel noted that the exchange of messages began with Individual A apologising to Mrs Aldridge for his behaviour, however, by the morning of 29 January 2018, the tone of his messages had changed and included phrases such as *"I will join that large group of people who truly despise you"*.

The panel noted the following communications which appeared to have been sent by Individual A to Mrs Aldridge:

- *"Word of warning, the knives have been drawn for you. Sadly your time might well be up. Keep looking over your shoulder Sarah, you have enemies who want to plot a very public end to your conduct"*.
- *"Yes I... did use that [REDACTED] to threaten you with, sorry..."*
- *"I was so desperate for you to stay that I even tried to set you up on [REDACTED] and stooped to a new level of messaging [REDACTED] which I hate myself for but I did with the sole motive of knowing how it would effect [sic] you..."*
- *"I truly hate you and you are now my worse [sic] enemy."*
- *"i am just collating all the evidence and it does not make for pretty reading. what a shame you were such a great teacher. just need to create a bit more for my insurance policy. oh and remember its me people believe not you so run along to the police if you like but it will get you nowhere. You are vindictive and spiteful and deserve everything your [sic] going to get."*

In respect of the text messages in which Mrs Aldridge purportedly admitted sexual communication with children, Mrs Aldridge's evidence was that Individual A had her mobile telephone and was sending the messages between their respective mobile telephones. Mrs Aldridge's evidence was that she was [REDACTED] with Individual A,

and that they began to engage in a heated discussion regarding Individual A's [REDACTED]. Mrs Aldridge's stated that Individual A was "*badgering*" her to send certain text messages to him. When Mrs Aldridge refused, Individual A "*snatched*" her telephone and [REDACTED]. It was Mrs Aldridge's evidence that this was part of Individual A's "*manipulation*" of her.

Mrs Aldridge stated that, whilst Individual A [REDACTED], he sent a number of text messages from her mobile telephone. Upon Individual A's return to sit with Mrs Aldridge, Mrs Aldridge stated that this behaviour continued and subsequently Individual A was typing messages from both his and Mrs Aldridge's mobile telephones. Mrs Aldridge stated that, thereafter, Individual A began dictating what responses to his messages she should type on her mobile telephone [REDACTED]. Mrs Aldridge accepted that these text messages were a "*big problem for her now*" but stated that the text messages were out of context, that she typed "*without thinking*" and that she was under significant pressure from Individual A to type them.

Mrs Aldridge's evidence was that, whilst some of the text messages contained within the screenshots were sent as set out above, some of the text messages were taken from a separate conversation.

In respect of the message Mrs Aldridge admitted to sending, her evidence was that this message was not sent of her own free will. Mrs Aldridge stated that, at the material time, [REDACTED] "*that [she] was unable to escape from*". Mrs Aldridge submitted that, at the time the message was sent, she was under "*extreme duress*" from Individual A.

During her oral evidence, Mrs Aldridge provided further information in respect of [REDACTED]. Mrs Aldridge stated that Individual A prevented her from [REDACTED]

Mrs Aldridge stated that Individual A [REDACTED].

In relation to the one message Mrs Aldridge admitted to sending to a child she believed was aged 16 years old, Mrs Aldridge's evidence was that she and Individual A were [REDACTED]. Mrs Aldridge stated that Individual A was angry at this time, typed "[REDACTED]" on his mobile telephone, gave the telephone to Mrs Aldridge and insisted that she type "[REDACTED]".

Mrs Aldridge recalled that Individual A [REDACTED]. Mrs Aldridge stated that [REDACTED] and that she wished Individual A to leave. Mrs Aldridge stated that Individual A informed her that one way to "*get rid*" of him would be to type the message as requested. Mrs Aldridge alleged that Individual A stated that, if she did not, he would put "*plan B*" into action. Mrs Aldridge's evidence was that she understood that this was a [REDACTED]. Mrs Aldridge stated that she typed the rest of the message and pressed send, stating "*now will you leave me alone*". It was Mrs Aldridge's evidence that Individual A said "*I haven't even started yet*" and walked off laughing.

Mrs Aldridge stated that she believed that Individual A [REDACTED].

In respect of the message Mrs Aldridge admitted sending, Mrs Aldridge accepted that, by sending this message, there was a potential safeguarding concern, although Mrs Aldridge stated that she did not know conclusively who the recipient was. Mrs Aldridge stated that she was concerned that, had she refused to send the message [REDACTED]. However, Mrs Aldridge accepted that she should have reported this as a safeguarding concern at the time the message was sent. The panel understood that this was subsequently reported by Mrs Aldridge, however this was not until between 18 and 24 months after the message was sent.

In reaching its decision, the panel first considered the message “[REDACTED]”. The panel noted that Mrs Aldridge admitted:

- the content of the message; her evidence was that Individual A had typed “[REDACTED]” and she then added, at his behest, the wording “[REDACTED]”
- sending the message, and in her evidence Mrs Aldridge admitted that this was sent via [REDACTED];
- that the message was of a sexual nature; and
- that Individual A told her the message was to [REDACTED] and that she inferred that the individual was aged around 16, but she did not see the person’s name or [REDACTED].

The panel did not have a copy of the message before it. However, it was satisfied on the balance of probabilities and in light of Mrs Aldridge’s admissions that the message “[REDACTED]” was sent via [REDACTED] in 2016. The panel was further satisfied that this amounted to a communication of a sexual nature. The question “[REDACTED]” related to whether the recipient had had sex or not and was, therefore, inherently sexual in nature. Finally, the panel was satisfied, on the balance of probabilities, that the message was sent to a child who Mrs Aldridge knew or ought to have known were around the age of 16; although the panel could not establish the recipient of the message, the panel was satisfied that this allegation was proven on the basis that Mrs Aldridge admitted that Individual A told her the message was being sent to a 16 year old child.

The panel concluded that Mrs Aldridge did, by her own admission, send this message. The panel took account of Mrs Aldridge’s evidence that she sent the message under extreme duress but considered that the extent to which Mrs Aldridge was acting under duress was a matter that would more appropriately be considered at the third stage of the professional conduct panel hearing (if, indeed, the matter reaches that stage) in accordance with paragraph 43 of the Teacher Misconduct: The Prohibition of Teachers, which is referred to as “the Advice”.

The panel also considered the [REDACTED] Messages from the '[REDACTED]' [REDACTED] in respect of this allegation. The panel was concerned, in particular, that the [REDACTED] from which the [REDACTED] messages were sent appeared to be one which was created by Mrs Aldridge.

Notwithstanding this, the panel noted that the screenshots of the [REDACTED] messages and the text messages which appeared to contain an admission by Mrs Aldridge to Individual A that she had been "sexting" teenage boys were disclosed by either Individual A or by Individual A [REDACTED] from a hard drive found shortly after Individual A [REDACTED] and subsequently provided to the police, but the panel was provided with no evidence that such messages were found on any of Mrs Aldridge's devices. The panel considered that Mrs Aldridge's explanation for the sending of the text messages, namely that these were sent either by Individual A or dictated by Individual A, was fanciful. However, the panel noted that any evidence implicating Mrs Aldridge in the sending of the [REDACTED] messages and text messages was hearsay evidence. The panel was unable to attach sufficient weight to this evidence in order to find that the TRA had proved, on the balance of probabilities, that Mrs Aldridge was the sender of either the [REDACTED] messages or the text messages.

Considering all of the evidence presented to it, including Mrs Aldridge's admissions, the panel found allegation 1 proven in respect of the message sent by Mrs Aldridge stating "[REDACTED]".

2. On an unknown date in 2016, you sent an image of a sexual nature to one or more children who you knew or ought to have known were around 16 years old;

The panel considered the email sent by Individual A dated 18 August 2018 in which he alleged that Mrs Aldridge was "sexting" 15- and 16-year-old boys and that this "often resulted in the exchange of naked pictures". Individual A further alleged that he had "text dialogue between her and myself where she admits she was sexting boys and exchanging naked pictures".

As set out above, the panel was provided with screenshots of the text messages which Individual A stated amounted to an admission that Mrs Aldridge had sent images to children. However, for the reasons set out above, the panel had concerns surrounding these documents and attached little weight to this hearsay evidence in reaching its decision in respect of this allegation.

Mrs Aldridge denied this allegation. Mrs Aldridge stated that there was no evidence provided of any alleged image, including any witness evidence. Mrs Aldridge submitted that, despite examination by the police, no images were found on her devices. Mrs Aldridge stated that she had no knowledge of images being sent to children. In her oral evidence, Mrs Aldridge confirmed that no one had ever told her what the alleged image was, and that she was never shown the alleged image.

The panel considered the evidence presented to it and noted that there was no evidence that any image of a sexual nature had been seen by the police or any others involved in investigating the allegations against Mrs Aldridge. The panel further noted that at no stage were the School, the police or the LADO provided with a description of the alleged image.

The panel considered that the TRA had presented insufficient evidence to prove, on the balance of probabilities, that any such image was sent, as alleged or at all.

The panel therefore found allegation 2 not proven.

3. On an unknown date in 2016, when asked by a 16 year old via [REDACTED] what age you were, you said you were 17;

As set out above, the panel was provided with copies of screenshots taken from a [REDACTED] in the name of '[REDACTED]'.

The panel noted the following exchange in particular:

- Child 30 – *“16 wbu”*
- '[REDACTED]' – *“17... am I too old??”*

As set out above, Mrs Aldridge denied sending the messages in the screenshots.

As set out above, the panel was concerned that the [REDACTED] messages were sent from an account belonging to Mrs Aldridge. However, the panel noted that this allegation derived from information given by Individual A to the School and/or found on their hard drive. The panel found Mrs Aldridge's account that her [REDACTED] had been used without her knowledge difficult to understand. However, as set out above in respect of allegation 1, there was evidence that Individual A had accessed the account on at least one occasion. In the circumstances, the panel concluded that the TRA had presented insufficient evidence to prove, on the balance of probabilities, that Mrs Aldridge was the sender of the messages sent by the '[REDACTED]' [REDACTED] and on that basis found allegation 3 not proven.

4. By your conduct as set out in allegation 3, you:

- a) Were dishonest; and**
- b) Failed to act with integrity**

Having found allegation 3 not proven, the panel did not go on to consider allegation 4.

5. Your behaviour as may be found proven above at allegation 1 and/or allegation 2 and/or allegation 3 was sexually motivated.

The panel considered this allegation in relation to the one message it found Mrs Aldridge had sent, “[REDACTED]”, as outlined above at allegation 1.

The panel considered the written and oral evidence of Mrs Aldridge. Mrs Aldridge denied this allegation, stating that she was coerced into sending a message which she acknowledged was sexual in nature, but stated that this was only sent out of immediate fear of repercussions from Individual A, further details of which are set out in respect of allegation 1. Mrs Aldridge denied any sexual attraction to teenage boys and denied that the message was sent for her “*own wants or gratification*”.

The panel’s attention was drawn to section 78 *Sexual Offences Act 2003* and to the cases of *Sait v The General Medical Council [2018]*, *Basson v General Medical Council [2018]* and *The General Medical Council v Haris [2020] EWHC 2518*.

The panel noted that in *Basson* it was stated that “*A sexual motive means that the conduct was done either in pursuit of sexual gratification or in pursuit of a sexual relationship*”.

The panel further noted that in *General Medical Council v Haris [2021] EWCA Civ 763*, it was stated that, “*In the absence of a plausible innocent explanation for what he did, the facts spoke for themselves. A sexual motive was plainly more likely than not; I would go so far as to say that that inference was overwhelming.*”

The panel noted that the message Mrs Aldridge admitted sending, which stated “[REDACTED]”, was objectively sexual nature in that it related to whether or not the recipient had had sex. The panel went on to consider Mrs Aldridge’s explanation for the conduct as set out in respect of allegation 1 above. The panel did not accept Mrs Aldridge’s explanation. The panel had found, as a matter of fact, that an experienced female teacher had sent a message to someone they believed to be a 16-year-old boy to enquire as to whether they had had sex. The panel considered all of the evidence presented to it and found that the words used, along with the sending of the message (and subsequent failure to report the message), indicated sexual motivation in the absence of any other plausible innocent explanation. The panel noted that Mrs Aldridge had not provided any other innocent explanation for her conduct. The panel considered that, on the balance of probabilities, the conduct was either in pursuit of sexual gratification or in pursuit of a sexual relationship.

The panel considered that Mrs Aldridge’s conduct as found proven at allegation 1 was sexually motivated, and therefore found allegation 5 proven.

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

Having found allegations 1 and 5 proven, the panel went on to consider whether the facts of those proved allegations amounted to unacceptable professional conduct and/or conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute.

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

The panel was satisfied that the conduct of Mrs Aldridge, in relation to the facts found proved, involved breaches of the Teachers’ Standards. The panel considered that, by reference to Part 2, Mrs Aldridge was 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
 - showing tolerance of and respect for the rights of others
- Teachers must have proper and professional regard for the ethos, policies and practices of the school in which they teach, and maintain high standards in their own attendance and punctuality.
- Teachers must have an understanding of, and always act within, the statutory frameworks which set out their professional duties and responsibilities.

Mrs Aldridge’s representative submitted to the panel that Mrs Aldridge’s conduct, as may be found proven, could not properly be characterised as unacceptable professional conduct due to Mrs Aldridge’s [REDACTED] and Mrs Aldridge’s account of significant duress.

Whilst the panel acknowledged that Mrs Aldridge had presented evidence in respect of both of these issues, the panel did not consider that Mrs Aldridge’s [REDACTED] and her [REDACTED] sufficiently detracted from the very serious nature of Mrs Aldridge’s conduct. The panel considered that the safeguarding of children by teachers is of the utmost importance and Mrs Aldridge’s conduct in sending a communication of a sexual nature to a child she was told was 16 years old, and in subsequently failing to report her actions for between 18 and 24 months, amounted to serious and significant misconduct. In any event, and as set out above, the panel considered that the extent to which Mrs

Aldridge was acting under duress was a matter that would more appropriately be considered at the third stage of the professional conduct panel hearing.

The panel was therefore satisfied that the conduct of Mrs Aldridge amounted to misconduct of a serious nature which fell significantly short of the standards expected of the profession.

The panel also considered whether Mrs Aldridge's conduct displayed behaviours associated with any of the offences listed on pages 12 and 13 of the Advice.

The panel found that the offence of sexual communication with a child was relevant. The Advice indicates that where behaviours associated with such an offence exist, a panel is more likely to conclude that an individual's conduct would amount to unacceptable professional conduct.

The panel noted that although allegation 1 took place outside the education setting, it was relevant to Mrs Aldridge's position as a teacher in that the panel had found that she had sent communications of a sexual nature to an individual she believed was a pupil aged child, this being a child aged 16.

Accordingly, the panel was satisfied that Mrs Aldridge was guilty of unacceptable professional conduct.

The panel took into account the way 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 also took account of the uniquely influential role that teachers can hold in pupils' lives and the fact that pupils must be able to view teachers as role models in the way that they behave.

The findings of misconduct are serious, and the conduct displayed would be likely to have a negative impact on the individual's status as a teacher, potentially damaging the public perception.

The panel therefore found that Mrs Aldridge's actions constituted conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute.

Having found the facts of allegations 1 and 5 proved, the panel further found that Mrs Aldridge's conduct amounted to both unacceptable professional conduct and 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 was 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 had to consider whether it would be an appropriate and proportionate measure, and whether it would be in the public interest to do so.

The panel was aware that 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, found a number of them to be relevant in this case, namely the safeguarding and wellbeing of pupils and the protection of other members of the public, the maintenance of public confidence in the profession, declaring and upholding proper standards of conduct and that prohibition strikes the right balance between the rights of the teacher and the public interest, if they are in conflict.

In the light of the panel's findings against Mrs Aldridge, which involved sending a communication of a sexual nature to pupil aged children, there was a strong public interest consideration in the safeguarding and wellbeing of pupils and the protection of other members of the public.

Similarly, the panel considered that public confidence in the profession could be seriously weakened if conduct such as that found against Mrs Aldridge was not treated with the utmost seriousness when regulating the conduct of the profession.

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

In view of the clear public interest considerations 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 Mrs Aldridge. The panel was mindful of the need to strike the right balance between the rights of the teacher and the public interest.

In carrying out the balancing exercise, the panel had regard to the public interest considerations both in favour of, and against, prohibition as well as the interests of Mrs Aldridge. 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 proved. In the list of such behaviours, those that were relevant in this case were:

- 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;
- sexual misconduct, for example, 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 some of the behaviour found proved in this case indicated that a prohibition order would be appropriate, the panel went on to consider the mitigating factors. Mitigating factors may indicate that a prohibition order would not be appropriate or proportionate.

The panel considered the mitigating factors put forward by Mr Storey on Mrs Aldridge's behalf, being her contribution to the education profession and the public interest in retaining her in the teaching profession, her insight and remorse, the circumstances surrounding the misconduct, in particular her [REDACTED] the fact it was out of character, and [REDACTED], and the time that had passed since the act of misconduct occurred. It also considered the mitigating factors referenced in the Advice.

The panel considered whether there was evidence that Mrs Aldridge's actions were not deliberate. It considered the evidence it had considered during the hearing relating to the first allegation and the sending of the admitted message. The panel had been troubled by Mrs Aldridge's oral evidence on this point during the hearing, and in particular her inability to provide a cogent and compelling explanation for how it came to be sent and why. The panel was concerned by her lack of clarity regarding some of her responses to questions put to her in cross examination and by the panel in relation to the message. For example, she failed to give direct answers and it took the panel several attempts to obtain from Mrs Aldridge a clear answer on certain points, one being whether she knew the recipient of the message was 16 or under. This was despite the gravity and weight of this issue, given it was the only message to which there was strong evidence that it had been sent by Mrs Aldridge. The panel concluded that the message had been sent deliberately. Mrs Aldridge admitted she had been aware of its content, had admitted she had sent it, and she accepted that she knew or ought to have known the recipient was around 16.

The panel moved to consider whether there was evidence that Mrs Aldridge was acting under extreme duress and also considered Mr Storey's submissions that Mrs Aldridge's conduct had been out of character and due to the circumstances of [REDACTED] [REDACTED] at the material time.

The panel considered all the evidence on this point, [REDACTED] adduced into evidence by Mrs Aldridge together with Mr Storey's submissions. The panel weighed this evidence against the absence of any contemporaneous evidence of Mrs Aldridge's [REDACTED] and having suffered duress at the material time. The panel noted that the main evidence relied upon was retrospective, after the event, and heavily reliant upon Mrs Aldridge's

account of what had taken place, in respect of the information relied upon by [REDACTED] and by those who gave character references on Mrs Aldridge's behalf.

Mrs Aldridge gave evidence that she considered the School a safe refuge, had positive working relationships and had continued to thrive in her career during the material time. However, there was no evidence adduced that Mrs Aldridge had confided in anyone during the material time that she was suffering the extreme duress which she later reported.

The panel considered the evidence that Mrs Aldridge continued to live [REDACTED]. She therefore had spent the majority of her time apart from Individual A. She also confirmed she had positive relationships with colleagues. The panel found it difficult to accept that in those circumstances Mrs Aldridge could have been under the level of duress she stated she was, such that she was forced to send the message she admitted to having sent, which contravened serious safeguarding protocols which she would have been well versed in as a member of the School's leadership team.

Overall, the panel was not satisfied that there was sufficient evidence that Mrs Aldridge had been under extreme duress at the material time.

The panel considered the evidence and submissions put forward in support of Mrs Aldridge demonstrating high standards in both personal and professional conduct and having contributed significantly to the education sector. The panel considered the character references adduced in the bundle but overall considered these fell short of demonstrating the high level of personal and professional conduct described by Mr Storey in his submissions. References made by work colleagues were of some age and only one reference was a formal reference made by an employer. That reference, provided by [REDACTED] in October 2020, is positive as to Mrs Aldridge's performance, but it acknowledges that she had only worked with Mrs Aldridge for a year. It is not, in the panel's opinion, sufficient to demonstrate exceptional, or even a high standard of professional conduct and a significant contribution to the education sector so as to weigh heavily on the side of the public interest in retaining Mrs Aldridge in the education profession.

The panel considered the evidence submitted by Mrs Aldridge, and the submissions made by Mr Storey concerning Mrs Aldridge's remorse and insight. It was satisfied that Mrs Aldridge had taken all the measures that could reasonably be expected to have been taken by her, including those recommended by Individual C, to understand her [REDACTED], how she had been attracted into, and had remained in, what had been a very [REDACTED] with Individual A, and the impact that that [REDACTED] had had on her. The panel was satisfied that having taken such measures, it was unlikely she would [REDACTED] in the future that might lead to a repetition of the conduct found proven at allegations 1 and 5 or that she would otherwise repeat such conduct.

The panel moved on to consider whether, in light of its conclusions, it would be proportionate to determine this case with no recommendation of prohibition, considering whether the publication of the findings made by the panel would be sufficient.

The panel was of the view that, applying the standard of the ordinary intelligent citizen, it would not be a proportionate and appropriate response to recommend no prohibition order. Recommending that the publication of adverse findings would be sufficient would unacceptably compromise the public interest considerations present in this case, despite the severity of the consequences for Mrs Aldridge of prohibition and the level of insight and remorse Mrs Aldridge had demonstrated.

The panel was of the view that prohibition was both proportionate and appropriate. The panel decided that the public interest considerations outweighed the interests of Mrs Aldridge. The severity of the conduct was a significant factor in forming that opinion. The panel had found, as a matter of fact, that an experienced teacher had sent a message to an individual she believed to be a 16-year-old boy to enquire as to whether they had had sex. The panel had not been satisfied by the account Mrs Aldridge had given in her evidence of how and why this message had been sent. Upon consideration of all the evidence presented to it the panel had found that the words used, along with the sending of the message (and subsequent failure to report the message), indicated sexual motivation. Accordingly, the panel, having consideration of the Advice, made 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 for it to decide to recommend a review period of the order. The panel was mindful that the Advice states 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 proved, would militate against the recommendation of a review period. One of these behaviours includes any sexual misconduct involving a child / any activity involving viewing, taking, making, possessing, distributing or publishing any indecent photograph or image or indecent pseudo photograph or image of a child. The panel found that Mrs Aldridge was responsible for sending a communication of a sexual nature to a child who she knew or ought to have known was around 16 years old.

The panel decided that the findings indicated a situation in which a review period would be appropriate and, as such, decided that it would be proportionate, in all the circumstances, for the prohibition order to be recommended with provision for a review period after two years.

In making this decision the panel considered the time that had passed since the conduct occurred and the steps Mrs Aldridge had taken during this time to explore and understand her [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and its impact upon her and was reassured that it was very unlikely there would be a repetition of the conduct. Whilst, therefore, the conduct was serious in nature the panel considered that the mitigation evidence and submissions extended on Mrs Aldridge's behalf persuaded it that a prohibition order with a review period after two years was proportionate in terms of having the least severe impact on Mrs Aldridge whilst being adequate to protect the public interest.

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 some of the allegations proven and found that those proven facts amount to unacceptable professional conduct and conduct that may bring the profession into disrepute. In this case, the panel has found some of the allegations not proven (including allegations 2 and 3), I have therefore put those matters entirely from my mind.

The panel has made a recommendation to the Secretary of State that Mrs Sarah Aldridge should be the subject of a prohibition order, with a review period of two years.

In particular, the panel has found that Mrs Aldridge 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
 - showing tolerance of and respect for the rights of others
- Teachers must have proper and professional regard for the ethos, policies and practices of the school in which they teach, and maintain high standards in their own attendance and punctuality.

- Teachers must have an understanding of, and always act within, the statutory frameworks which set out their professional duties and responsibilities.

The panel finds that the conduct of Mrs Aldridge fell significantly short of the standards expected of the profession.

The findings of misconduct are serious as they include a finding which involved sending communication of a sexual nature to pupil aged children.

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 or conduct likely to 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 Mrs Aldridge, and the impact that will have on the teacher, is proportionate and in the public interest.

In this case, I have considered the extent to which a prohibition order would protect children/safeguard pupils. The panel has observed, "In the light of the panel's findings against Mrs Aldridge, which involved sending a communication of a sexual nature to pupil aged children, there was a strong public interest consideration in the safeguarding and wellbeing of pupils and the protection of other members of the public." A prohibition order would therefore prevent such a risk 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 considered the evidence submitted by Mrs Aldridge, and the submissions made by Mr Storey concerning Mrs Aldridge's remorse and insight. It was satisfied that Mrs Aldridge had taken all the measures that could reasonably be expected to have been taken by her, including those recommended by Individual C, to understand her [REDACTED], how she had been attracted into, and had remained in, what had been a very [REDACTED] with Individual A, and the impact that that [REDACTED] had had on her. The panel was satisfied that having taken such measures, it was unlikely she would [REDACTED] in the future that might lead to a repetition of the conduct found proven at allegations 1 and 5 or that she would otherwise repeat such conduct." I have therefore given this element 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, "the panel considered that public confidence in the profession could be seriously weakened if conduct such as that found against Mrs Aldridge was not treated with the utmost seriousness when regulating the

conduct of the profession.” I am particularly mindful of the finding of sexual communication with a child 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 or conduct likely to bring the profession into disrepute, 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 Mrs Aldridge herself and the panel comment “The panel considered the evidence and submissions put forward in support of Mrs Aldridge demonstrating high standards in both personal and professional conduct and having contributed significantly to the education sector. The panel considered the character references adduced in the bundle but overall considered these fell short of demonstrating the high level of personal and professional conduct described by Mr Storey in his submissions. References made by work colleagues were of some age and only one reference was a formal reference made by an employer. That reference, provided by Individual D [REDACTED] in October 2020, is positive as to Mrs Aldridge’s performance, but it acknowledges that she had only worked with Mrs Aldridge for a year. It is not, in the panel’s opinion, sufficient to demonstrate exceptional, or even a high standard of professional conduct and a significant contribution to the education sector so as to weigh heavily on the side of the public interest in retaining Mrs Aldridge in the education profession.”

A prohibition order would prevent Mrs Aldridge from teaching. A prohibition order would also clearly deprive the public of her contribution to the profession for the period that it is in force.

In this case, I have placed considerable weight on the following comment “The panel considered whether there was evidence that Mrs Aldridge’s actions were not deliberate. It considered the evidence it had considered during the hearing relating to the first allegation and the sending of the admitted message. The panel had been troubled by Mrs Aldridge’s oral evidence on this point during the hearing, and in particular her inability to provide a cogent and compelling explanation for how it came to be sent and why. The panel was concerned by her lack of clarity regarding some of her responses to questions put to her in cross examination and by the panel in relation to the message. For example, she failed to give direct answers and it took the panel several attempts to obtain from Mrs Aldridge a clear answer on certain points, one being whether she knew the recipient of

the message was 16 or under. This was despite the gravity and weight of this issue, given it was the only message to which there was strong evidence that it had been sent by Mrs Aldridge. The panel concluded that the message had been sent deliberately. Mrs Aldridge admitted she had been aware of its content, had admitted she had sent it, and she accepted that she knew or ought to have known the recipient was around 16.”

In considering the mitigating circumstances of this case, the panel also said “Overall, the panel was not satisfied that there was sufficient evidence that Mrs Aldridge had been under extreme duress at the material time.”

I have also placed considerable weight on the finding that “The panel was of the view that prohibition was both proportionate and appropriate. The panel decided that the public interest considerations outweighed the interests of Mrs Aldridge. The severity of the conduct was a significant factor in forming that opinion. The panel had found, as a matter of fact, that an experienced teacher had sent a message to an individual she believed to be a 16-year-old boy to enquire as to whether they had had sex. The panel had not been satisfied by the account Mrs Aldridge had given in her evidence of how and why this message had been sent. Upon consideration of all the evidence presented to it the panel had found that the words used, along with the sending of the message (and subsequent failure to report the message), indicated sexual motivation.”

I have placed some weight on the following “The panel considered the evidence and submissions put forward in support of Mrs Aldridge demonstrating high standards in both personal and professional conduct and having contributed significantly to the education sector. The panel considered the character references adduced in the bundle but overall considered these fell short of demonstrating the high level of personal and professional conduct described by Mr Storey in his submissions.”

I have given less weight in my consideration of sanction therefore, to the contribution that Mrs Aldridge 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, in light of the circumstances in this case, 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 a two year review period.

I have considered the panel’s comments “In making this decision the panel considered the time that had passed since the conduct occurred and the steps Mrs Aldridge had taken during this time to explore and understand her [REDACTED] and its impact upon her and was reassured that it was very unlikely there would be a repetition of the

conduct. Whilst, therefore, the conduct was serious in nature the panel considered that the mitigation evidence and submissions extended on Mrs Aldridge's behalf persuaded it that a prohibition order with a review period after two years was proportionate in terms of having the least severe impact on Mrs Aldridge whilst being adequate to protect the public interest."

I agree with the panel and have decided that a two year review period is proportionate in this case in order to maintain public confidence and is in the public interest.

This means that Mrs Sarah Aldridge is prohibited from teaching indefinitely and cannot teach in any school, sixth form college, relevant youth accommodation or children's home in England. She may apply for the prohibition order to be set aside, but not until 2027, two years from the date of this order at the earliest. This is not an automatic right to have the prohibition order removed. If she does apply, a panel will meet to consider whether the prohibition order should be set aside. Without a successful application, Mrs Aldridge remains prohibited from teaching indefinitely.

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

Mrs Aldridge has a right of appeal to the King's Bench Division of the High Court within 28 days from the date she is given notice of this order.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S Buxcey', with a stylized, cursive script.

Decision maker: Sarah Buxcey

Date: 14 January 2025

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