HOLLY THOMAS, BEFORE THE

Appellants MARYLAND

v. STATE BOARD

PRINCE GEORGE'S OF EDUCATION COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION,

Opinion No. 25-12

Appellee.

OPINION

INTRODUCTION

The Appellant, who was employed by Prince George's County Public Schools ("PGCPS") as a certificated resource teacher, appeals the June 28, 2024, decision of the Prince George's County Board of Education ("local board") suspending the Appellant for three days without pay for misconduct in office for bringing a Taser onto school grounds. The Appellant received a *Loudermill* conference during which a union representative was present and had an evidentiary hearing before a local board hearing examiner during which the Appellant was represented by legal counsel.

We transferred the case pursuant to COMAR 13A.01.05.07A(1)(b) to the Office of Administrative Hearings ("OAH") for review by an Administrative Law Judge ("ALJ"). The ALJ conducted a hearing on October 4, 2024. On December 9, 2024, the ALJ issued a Proposed Decision recommending that the State Board affirm the local board's decision suspending the Appellant for three days without pay for misconduct in office for bringing a Taser onto school grounds.

The Appellant did not file any exceptions to the ALJ's proposed decision.

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The factual background in this case is set forth in the ALJ's proposed decision, Findings of Fact, pp. 4-5.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

Because this appeal involves the suspension of a certificated employee pursuant to §6-202 of the Education Article, the State Board exercises its independent judgment on the record before it in determining whether to sustain the suspension. COMAR 13A.01.05.06F(2). The local board has the burden of proof by a preponderance of the evidence. COMAR 13A.01.05.06F(3).

The State Board transferred this case to OAH for proposed findings of fact and conclusions of law by an ALJ. In such cases, the State Board may affirm, reverse, modify or remand the ALJ's proposed decision. The State Board's final decision, however, must identify and state reasons for any changes, modifications or amendments to the proposed decision. *See* Md. Code Ann., State Gov't §10-216(b).

LEGAL ANAYLSIS

Based on a preponderance of the evidence, the ALJ determined that the Appellant's possession of a Taser on school property violated the PGCPS Employee Code of Conduct, which prohibits the possession of weapons on PGCPS property, and that such a violation amounted to misconduct in office warranting a three-day suspension without pay. The Appellant did not file any exceptions to the ALJ's Proposed Decision.

We have reviewed the record and concur with the conclusions of the ALJ. The Appellant's possession of a functioning Taser on school grounds was a violation of the weapons prohibition of the PGCPS Employee Code of Conduct and constitutes misconduct in office. The facts in the record, including the Appellant's disciplinary history, support the three-day penalty imposed. The Appellant's disciplinary history includes a Letter of Reprimand for inappropriate behavior towards the principal, inappropriate communications towards a student, and inappropriate conduct for recording students during instruction. As to mitigating factors, the Appellant forgot that the Taser was in her bag and there were no prior or subsequent occurrences of possession of a weapon. Thus, we find the three-day suspension to be appropriate.

CONCLUSION

We agree with the ALJ's assessment that the record in this case supports the local board's suspension of the Appellant from her position for three days without pay on the grounds of misconduct in office. We, therefore, adopt the ALJ's Proposed Decision and affirm the local board's decision.

Joshua L. Michael

/President

Monica Goldson

Vice-President

Chuen-Chin Bianca Chang

Chet Chesterfield

Kenny Clash

Clarence C. Crawford

Nick Greer

Irma Johnson

Kim Lewis

Kim Lewis

Xiomara Medina

Abstained: Rachel McCusker

Absent: Joan Mele-McCarthy Samir Paul

February 25, 2025

| HOLLY THOMAS, | * | BEFORE ROBERT B. LEVIN, | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| APPELLANT | * | ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE, | | | | |
| v. | * | MARYLAND OFFICE OF | | | | |
| BOARD OF EDUCATION | * | ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS | | | | |
| OF PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY | * | OAH No.: MSDE-BE-01-24-23355 | | | | |
| | _ | | | | | |

PROPOSED DECISION

STATEMENT OF THE CASE
ISSUE
SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE
FINDINGS OF FACT
DISCUSSION
CONCLUSION OF LAW
PROPOSED ORDER

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On or about July 12, 2023, the Superintendent of Schools for Prince George's Public Schools (PGCPS) notified the Appellant, a resource teacher at Cool Spring Elementary School, that he was recommending the Appellant's suspension for three (3) days without pay from her position for bringing a Taser onto school grounds. Md. Code Ann., Educ. § 6-202(a)(1) (2022 & Supp. 2023). The Appellant requested a hearing before the Board of Education for Prince George's County (County Board), and on March 26, 2024, hearing examiner Kia Chandler recommended that the suspension should be upheld only on the grounds of Misconduct in Office for bringing a Taser onto school grounds. *Id.* § 6-202(a)(2)-(3). On June 28, 2024, the County

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references to the Education Article are to the 2022 version and the 2023 Supplement.

Board accepted the hearing examiner's recommendation and suspended the Appellant for three (3) days without pay, for Misconduct in Office only, for bringing a Taser onto school grounds.²

The Appellant appealed to the Maryland State Board of Education (MSDE) on or about July 4, 2024. Educ. § 6-202(a)(4). On August 27, 2024, the MSDE referred the matter to the Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) for hearing and to issue a proposed decision, containing findings of fact, conclusions of law, and recommendations. Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) 13A.01.05.07A(1)(b) and E.

I conducted a hearing on October 4, 2024, at the OAH, 11101 Gilroy Road, Hunt Valley, Maryland. The Appellant was self-represented. Roger Thomas, Esquire, represented the County Board.

Procedure is governed by the contested case provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act, the procedural regulations for appeals to the State Board of Education, and the Rules of Procedure of the Office of Administrative Hearings. Md. Code Ann., State Gov't §§ 10-201 through 10-226 (2021 & Supp. 2024); COMAR 13A.01.05; COMAR 28.02.01.

ISSUE

Did the County Board properly suspend the Appellant for three days without pay for bringing a functioning Taser onto school property?

recommended a three-day suspension without pay. Therefore, I will confine my analysis to (a) whether the Appellant committed Misconduct in Office in regard to the Taser incident, and (b) whether the three-day suspension without pay was proper.

² The hearing examiner recommended that a companion charge of Willful Neglect against the Appellant for allegedly yanking a student by his bookbag should *not* be upheld, and recommended that the Appellant *not* be disciplined for that charge. At the October 4, 2024 hearing on this appeal at the OAH, the County Board argued before me and relied *only* on the hearing examiner's recommended finding that the Appellant committed Misconduct in Office when she brought a functioning Taser onto school grounds, for which the hearing officer

SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE

Exhibits

I admitted the following exhibits on behalf of the County Board:³

- Board Ex. 1 Order of the Prince George's County Board of Education, June 28, 2024
- Board Ex. 2 Hearing Examiner's Findings of Fact, Conclusions of Law and Recommendation, March 16, 2024
- Board Ex. 3 County Board's Post-Hearing Closing Statement, March 14, 2024
- Board Ex. 4 Appellant's Closing Arguments, March 14, 2024
- Board Ex. 5 Transcript of January 17, 2024 Hearing before the County Board's Hearing Examiner
- Board Ex. 6 Letter from Millard House, II, Superintendent of Schools, to the Appellant, July 12, 2023⁴
- Board Ex. 7 Document titled, "Disruptive Acts that Require Security Measures," July 1, 2013; email from Niki T. Newman-Brown to the Appellant, October 17, 2022; Investigative Report and Findings, May 30, 2023; Email from the Appellant to Niki Brown, October 14, 2022; and attachments, various dates⁵
- Board Ex. 8 Superintendent's Exhibits 1-11, various dates⁶

The Appellant did not offer any exhibits.

Testimony

The Appellant testified and did not present other witnesses. The County Board presented argument and did not present any witness testimony.

³ The County Board submitted its exhibits in a binder titled "Record of Proceedings."

⁴ Board Exhibit 6 is identified in the Table of Contents to the County Board's exhibits as "Joint Exh. 1" admitted in evidence at the hearing conducted by the County Board's Hearing Examiner.

⁵ Board Exhibit 7 is identified in the Table of Contents to the County Board's exhibits as "Appellant Exhibits 1, 1A, 1B and 2-4" admitted in evidence at the hearing conducted by the County Board's Hearing Examiner.

⁶ Board Exhibit 8 are exhibits admitted in evidence at the hearing conducted by the County Board's Hearing Examiner.

FINDINGS OF FACT

I find the following facts by a preponderance of the evidence:

- 1. During the 2022-2023 school year, the Appellant worked as a Resource Teacher at Cool Spring Elementary School (Cool Spring).
- 2. As of October 14, 2022, the Appellant had worked at Cool Spring for two years and had been employed by PGCPS for more than five years.
- 3. The Appellant owned a functioning Taser that she kept in her purse for personal protection while walking her dog at night, in case she was threatened by another person or by a dog.
- 4. A few days before October 14, 2022, the Appellant was in New York City to attend her father's funeral. She took the Taser to New York for protection in case she was threatened while walking in New York.
- 5. The Appellant returned to Maryland on October 13, 2022. She had little rest and forgot the Taser was still in her bag when she went to work the next day.
- 6. On October 14, 2022, the Appellant was having lunch in the Cool Spring teachers' lounge. Three other teachers, L.M., K.B., and L.I., were in the lounge at the time at a different table where they were discussing planning.
- 7. The Appellant went to retrieve an item from her wallet and saw that the Taser's light was on. The Taser's switch had three settings: to turn the light on, turn the light off, or activate the Taser. The Appellant pushed the switch too far to the right, causing the Taser to make a loud-enough buzzing sound that the three other teachers in the lounge could hear it.
 - 8. Teacher L.M. heard a loud noise go off.

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⁷ The three teachers, whose written statements are included in the Record of Proceedings, are referred to by their initials for privacy. Their full names are contained in the record.

- 9. Teacher K.B. suddenly heard a loud zapping noise behind her. Turning to look, she saw the Appellant with a Taser going off in her hand.
- 10. Teacher A.I. heard a loud noise and saw the Appellant with a Taser going off in her hand.
 - 11. The teachers who witnessed the incident left the lounge and reported the incident.
- 12. After the witnesses reported the incident, Assistant Principal Miller went to the Appellant's classroom and asked her to step out. He asked her if she had a Taser in her possession. She said yes and got her purse. The Assistant Principal asked if he could take possession of the Taser, but the Appellant refused.
- 13. The Appellant put the Taser in her car, which was parked on the Cool Spring parking lot. The parking lot is school property.
- 14. Sergeant Earl⁸ arrived and asked if he could take possession of the Taser, but the Appellant refused.
 - 15. Ultimately the Appellant was escorted out of the school building.
- 16. Prior to the October 14, 2022 incident with the Taser, the Appellant had received a letter of reprimand for "inappropriate behavior towards your Principal, inappropriate communications toward a student, and inappropriate conduct for recording students during instruction." (Board Ex. 2, p. 16).

DISCUSSION

Legal Framework and Burden of Proof

Section 6-202 of the Education Article of the Maryland Code provides that "[o]n the recommendation of the county superintendent, a county board may suspend (or dismiss) a teacher, principal, supervisor, assistant superintendent, or other professional assistant for . . . misconduct in office" Educ. § 6-202(a)(1)(ii) and (v) (2022). Section 602(a)(2)-(4) sets forth the procedure

⁸ The record is unclear whether the sergeant was a police officer or school security officer.

for such suspension, including notice, opportunity for a hearing before the county board, in person or by counsel, to bring witnesses to the hearing, and the right to appeal the decision of the county board to the State Board. Educ. § 6-202(a)(2)-(4). The county board may have the proceedings heard first by a hearing examiner. Educ. § 6-203(a), (b). Pursuant to COMAR 13A.01.05.03D(1), (2), when a decision is appealed to the State Board, the county board shall transmit the record of the local proceedings with its response to an appeal, including a transcript of the proceedings.

COMAR sets forth the standard of review, applicable to this proceeding, in an appeal to the State Board:

Certificated Employee Suspension or Dismissal pursuant to Education Article, §6-202, Annotated Code of Maryland.

- (1) The standard of review for certificated employee suspension and dismissal actions shall be de novo as defined in $\S F(2)$ of this regulation.
- (2) The State Board shall exercise its independent judgment on the record before it in determining whether to sustain the suspension or dismissal of a certificated employee.
- (3) The local board has the burden of proof by a preponderance of the evidence.
 - (4) The State Board, in its discretion, may modify a penalty.

COMAR 13A.01.05.06F (emphasis added).9

COMAR 13A.01.05.07E provides that "[t]he administrative law judge shall submit in writing to the State Board a proposed decision containing findings of fact, conclusions of law, and recommendations, and distribute a copy of the proposed decision to the parties." To prove something by a preponderance of the evidence means that "something is more likely so than not so," when all the evidence is considered. *Coleman v. Anne Arundel Cnty. Police Dep't*, 369 Md. 108, 125 n.16 (2002); *see also Mathis v. Hargrove*, 166 Md. App. 286, 310 n.5 (2005).

⁹ At the outset of the hearing, I erroneously stated that the Appellant had the burden of proof. However, as the Appellant stated at the hearing that she is certified as a teacher in the State of Maryland, which the County Board did not dispute, the County Board has the burden of proof under COMAR 13A.01.05.06F, rather than the Appellant having the burden under COMAR 13A.01.05.06D. Accordingly, I have evaluated the evidence presented in this case, applying the law to the facts while viewing the evidence with the understanding that under COMAR

Accordingly, on behalf of the State Board and on the record before me, I shall exercise my independent judgment to determine whether the County Board established by a preponderance of the evidence that the Appellant engaged in misconduct by bringing a Taser onto school property, and should be subject to discipline.

Positions of the Parties

The County Board argued that it is undisputed that on October 14, 2022, the Appellant brought a weapon—the Taser—onto school grounds in violation of the PGCPS Employee Code of Conduct, where the following behavior is "Expected Conduct in the Workplace: "Do not possess firearms or other weapons on PGCPS property or at a PGCPS-sponsored activity." (Board Ex. 2, p. 5). The Code of Conduct provides that "Under no circumstances may any employee engage in any of the following activities: immorality, misconduct in office (which includes knowingly failing to report suspected child abuse or neglect), insubordination, incompetence, willful neglect of duty." *Id.* The Code further provides:

An employee's failure to perform expected behaviors, as well as an employee's performance of inappropriate behaviors (including but not limited to the items listed on the following pages, may result in the employee receiving disciplinary action, up to and including suspension or termination.

(Board's Record of Proceedings binder, bates-numbered p. 415).

The Appellant responded by arguing that the Taser is not a weapon covered by the Code of Conduct. She was aware of the policy against possessing firearms on school property, but a Taser is not a firearm. She further argued that she did not intentionally break any rules. She had just returned from New York City where she buried her father, only had two hours of rest, and went to work forgetting the Taser was in her bag. She had the Taser with her in New York for personal protection in case she was threatened while walking there. At home she carried it while walking the dog in case she was threatened by a person or a dog.

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¹⁰ The entire Code of Conduct is included in the Board's Record of Proceedings binder at bates-numbered pages 412-425.

She was eating lunch in the teachers' lounge and reaching for her wallet when she saw her Taser's light was on. She pushed the switch too far to the right, and it made a buzzing sound. The Taser has three switches: one to turn the light one, one to turn the light off, and one to activate the Taser. She did not know she had the Taser in her possession until the light went on. She only carried it for personal protection, and certainly not to defend against students or co-workers. She did not bring it to school on purpose or as a weapon against students or teachers. It was just a mistake that had never happened before and was never repeated.

For the following reasons, I recommend that the County Board's decision to impose a three-day suspension for the Appellant's Misconduct in Office by violating the PGCPS weapon policy should be upheld.

<u>Analysis</u>

The County Board's recommendation of the three-day suspension was on the ground of Misconduct in Office. The seminal Maryland case on Misconduct in Office is *Resetar v. State Board of Education*, 284 Md. 537, 560-61 (1979), in which the Supreme Court of Maryland stated that the term misconduct "is sufficiently comprehensive to include malfeasance as well as misfeasance," and "whether a particular course of conduct will be regarded as misconduct is to be determined from the nature of the conduct and not from its consequences." ¹¹

The Appellant's argument that the Taser is not a weapon covered by the PGCPS

Employee Code of Conduct fails. The PGCPS Code of Conduct instructs employee as follows:

"[d]o not possess firearms or other weapons on PGCPS property or at a PGCPS facility."

¹¹ Black's Law Dictionary defines "misfeasance" as:

[[]a] misdeed or trespass. The doing what a party ought to do improperly.... The improper performance of some act which a man may lawfully do.... Misfeasance, strictly, is not doing a lawful act in a proper manner, omitting to do it as it should be done; while malfeasance is the doing an act wholly wrongful; and non-feasance is an omission to perform a duty, or a total neglect of duty. But misfeasance is often carelessly used in the sense of 'malfeasance.' (citations omitted). https://thelawdictionary.org/misfeasance/ (last visited December 5, 2024).

Black's Law Dictionary defines "malfeasance" as: The wrongful or unjust doing of some act which the doer has no right to perform, or which he has stipulated by contract not to do." (citations omitted). https://thelawdictionary.org/malfeasance/ (last visited December 5, 2024).

(emphasis added). The question whether a Taser is a weapon must be answered in the affirmative. Tasers are classified as "electronic control devices" under Maryland law. Title 4 of the Criminal Law Article of the Maryland Code addresses "Weapon Crimes." Section 4-109 defines an "electronic control device" as "a portable device designed as a *weapon* capable of injuring, immobilizing, or inflicting pain on an individual by the discharge of electrical current." Md. Code Ann., Crim Law § 4-109(a)(3) (2021) (emphasis added).

Moreover, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the noun "Taser" as "A proprietary name for: a *weapon* which fires barbs attached by wires to batteries and causes temporary paralysis."

https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/Meanings?textTermText0=taser&textTermOpt0=WordPh rase (emphasis added), (last visited December 5, 2024). And a general definition of "weapon" is "any instrument or device for use in attack or defense in combat, fighting, or war...anything used against an opponent, adversary, or victim." https://www.dictionary.com/browse/weapon (last viewed December 5, 2024).

Under both statutory and dictionary definitions, a Taser is a weapon. As such, PGCPS employees are prohibited from possessing a Taser on school grounds.

The evidence shows that the Appellant brought a functioning Taser onto school grounds and inadvertently switched it on. Other teachers in the lounge heard it buzzing and saw it in the Appellant's hand. The incident had the potential, if not the actuality, of frightening the witnesses to it. The incident alarmed the other the other teachers who reported it. The Taser had the potential of causing greater harm if it had wound up in the wrong hands in the school.

The hearing examiner concluded, and I agree, that the Appellant committed misconduct when she brought a functioning Taser to school property, even if she did not intend to do so. The

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¹² The hearing officer found, and I agree, that a separate PGCPS weapons prohibition, Administrative Procedure 10201, is applicable to PGCPS *students*, not employees. Therefore, the Appellant did not violate Administrative Procedure 10201. As the local board argued, however, students would be held accountable if they brought a Taser to school, and teachers should not be held to a lesser standard.

Code of Conduct instructs employees, without qualification regarding their intent: "Do not possess firearms or other weapons on PGCPS property or at a PGCPS-sponsored activity."

A requirement that bringing a weapon to school must be intentional would be inconsistent with the public safety interest that animates the weapons possession rule. To accept the Appellant's argument that her inadvertent possession of the Taser was not misconduct would create an exception that could swallow up the rule against weapons possession in schools. It could incentivize employees to carry weapons to school, and upon discovery make the hard-to-rebut claim that their possession of the weapon was merely an inadvertent oversight. A strict interpretation of the "no weapons in school policy" is not unfair to employees. All teachers and other PGCPS employees need to do so as not to run afoul of the weapons ban is check their pockets, bags, and vehicle to confirm they are weapon-free.

Whether characterized as misfeasance (committing an otherwise lawful act in an improper manner, *i.e.* bringing a Taser that one has a right to possess to a school where weapons are prohibited) or as malfeasance (committing an act which the doer has no right to do, *i.e.* bringing a weapon into a school), I conclude that County Board proved that the Appellant committed Misconduct in Office by possessing the functioning Taser in school in violation of the Employee Code of Conduct's weapons prohibition.

Having concluded that the Appellant committed Misconduct in Office by bringing the Taser onto school grounds, the remaining issue is whether a three-day suspension without pay is warranted. PGCPS's Employee Code of Conduct provides in relevant part:

Typical disciplinary actions include the following: written reprimand, suspension. PGCPS is not obligated to use any specific level of progressive discipline or use the disciplinary actions in the order listed above. Progressive discipline is a flexible process. The particular facts of each situation determine which of the above actions will be appropriate. In degerming the specific level of discipline for each case, the following considerations may be weighted: the number of different offenses involved, the seriousness of the offense and the evidence available, time between prior disciplinary actions, if applicable, prior work history of employee, performance evaluations, and mitigating factors.

(Board Ex. 2, p. 16).

Here, the Appellant's prior disciplinary record was limited to a letter of reprimand for "inappropriate behavior towards your Principal, inappropriate communications toward a student, and inappropriate conduct for recording students during instruction." *Id*.

As mitigating factors, the County Board, the hearing examiner, and I considered and weighted the facts that: (1) the Appellant had never brought a Taser to school grounds before or since, and (2) the event was unintentional in that she had just returned from her father's funeral and with little sleep reported for work forgetting the Taser was in her bag. As the hearing examiner noted, however, in a passage with which I agree:

bringing a functioning Taser onto school grounds, whether intentional or not, especially considering the climate that schools face with weapons on school policy is dangerous and of a serious nature, such that disciplinary action is appropriate.... [A] suspension of three days without pay, for this sole act, is reasonable considering the seriousness of the act.

Id. Therefore, I recommend the three-day suspension without pay should be upheld.

CONCLUSION OF LAW

Based on the foregoing Findings of Fact and Discussion, I conclude, as a matter of law, that the Board of Education of Prince George's County properly suspended the Appellant for three (3) days without pay for Misconduct in Office for bringing a Taser onto school grounds.

Md. Code Ann., Educ. § 6-202(a)(1)(ii) (2022); Prince George's County Public Schools

Employee Code of Conduct (Record of Proceedings, pp. 412-425).

PROPOSED ORDER

I **PROPOSE** that the decision of the Board of Education of Prince George's County suspending the Appellant for three (3) days without pay for Misconduct in Office for bringing a Taser onto school grounds be **AFFIRMED**.

December 9, 2024
Date Decision Mailed

Robert B. Levin
Administrative Law Judge

RBL/at #215285

NOTICE OF RIGHT TO FILE EXCEPTIONS

A party adversely affected by this Proposed Decision has the right to file written exceptions within fifteen (15) days of the Proposed Decision; written responses to the exceptions may be filed within fifteen (15) days of the filing of exceptions. COMAR 13A.01.05.07F. Exceptions and responses shall be filed with the Maryland State Department of Education, Maryland State Board of Education, 200 West Baltimore Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21201-2595, with a copy to the other party or parties. The Office of Administrative Hearings is not a party to any review process.

Copies Mailed To:

Holly Thomas

Roger Thomas, Esquire 6305 Ivy Lane, Suite 700 Greenbelt, MD 20770

Millard House II, Superintendent Prince George's County Public Schools 14201 School Lane Upper Marlboro, MD 20772

| HOLLY THOMAS, | | | | | | | BEFORE ROBERT B. LEVIN, | | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|---|---|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| APPELLANT | | | | | * | ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE, | | | | | | |
| v. | | | | | | * | MARYLAND OFFICE OF | | | | | |
| BOARD OF EDUCATION | | | | | * | ADM | IINISTRATIVE HEARINGS | | | | | |
| OF PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY | | | | * | * OAH No.: MSDE-BE-01-24-2335 | | | | | | | |
| * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * |

FILE EXHIBIT LIST

I admitted the following exhibits on behalf of the County Board:

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