STATE OF FLORIDA
DIVISION OF ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS

MATTHEW J. HALE,

Petitioner,

vs. Case No. 21-2327

STATE BOARD OF ADMINISTRATION,

Respondent.
_____/

RECOMMENDED ORDER

Pursuant to notice, a final hearing was conducted in this case on November 17, 2021, via Zoom teleconference, before Lawrence P. Stevenson, a duly-designated Administrative Law Judge ("ALJ") of the Division of Administrative Hearings ("DOAH").

APPEARANCES

For Petitioner: Matthew J. Hale, pro se
Madison Correctional Institution
382 Southwest MCI Way
Madison, Florida 32340

For Respondent: Jonathan W. Taylor, Esquire
Moffa, Sutton, & Donnini, P.A.
100 West Cypress Creek Road, Suite 930
Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33309

Rex D. Ware, Esquire
Moffa, Sutton & Donnini, P.A.
Suite 330
3500 Financial Plaza
Tallahassee, Florida 32312

STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

The issue is whether, by operation of section 112.3173, Florida Statutes,[1] Petitioner has forfeited his Florida Retirement System ("FRS") Investment Plan account by being found guilty of two felony counts of traveling to meet a minor for sexual activity.

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

On January 30, 2019, Petitioner, Matthew J. Hale, was found guilty by a jury of two counts of "Traveling to Meet a Minor for Unlawful Sexual Conduct," each a second degree felony in violation of section 847.0135(4), Florida Statutes, and two counts of "Committing an Unnatural and Lascivious Act," each a second degree misdemeanor in violation of section 800.02, Florida Statutes. Petitioner was a teacher in the Bay County School District and the victim was a 16-year-old female student whom Petitioner met while teaching at her high school.

On July 7, 2021, Respondent, the State Board of Administration ("SBA"), notified Petitioner that his rights and benefits under the Florida Retirement System Investment Plan had been forfeited based on the felony convictions. In a Petition for Hearing signed by Petitioner on July 15, 2021,[2] Petitioner disputed whether his crimes fell within the scope of section 112.3173. Petitioner contended that he was between contracts with the Bay County School District at the time his crimes were committed and therefore was not a "public officer or employee" as defined in the statute.

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[1] References to the Florida Statutes are to the 2018 edition, the version in effect at the time of Petitioner's conviction. Section 112.3173, the only statute directly involved in this proceeding, has not been amended since 2012.

[2] At all times relevant to this proceeding, Petitioner has been incarcerated at the Madison Correctional Institution. This situation has required the SBA and this tribunal to grant Petitioner some leeway as to compliance with discovery and other deadlines, because Petitioner's incoming and outgoing mail must be screened by prison personnel.

On July 28, 2021, the SBA referred the case to DOAH for the assignment of an ALJ and the conduct of a formal hearing.

The final hearing was scheduled for October 6, 2021. By Order dated September 16, 2021, Respondent's Unopposed Motion to Continue Final Hearing was granted, and the hearing was rescheduled for November 17, 2021, on which date it was convened and completed.

At the hearing, the SBA presented the testimony of Allison Olson, Director of Policy, Risk Management and Compliance for the SBA's Office of Defined Contribution Programs. The SBA's Exhibits 1 through 15 were admitted into evidence.

Mr. Hale testified on his own behalf. Mr. Hale's Exhibits 1 through 3 were admitted into evidence.

The one-volume Transcript of the final hearing was filed with DOAH on December 16, 2021. At the conclusion of the hearing, the parties agreed that 30 days would be allotted for the filing of proposed recommended orders. Respondent timely filed its Proposed Recommended Order on January 14, 2022. Mr. Hale filed his Proposed Recommended Order on January 21, 2022, outside of the agreed time for the filing of proposed orders. Respondent did not object to the late filing and Petitioner's Proposed Recommended Order has therefore been considered in the preparation of this Recommended Order.

FINDINGS OF FACT

Based on the evidence adduced at hearing, and the record as a whole, the following Findings of Fact are made:

1. The SBA is the governmental entity that administers the FRS Investment Plan, a defined retirement benefits contribution plan. § 121.4501(1), Fla. Stat.

2. Mr. Hale is a former employee of Bay District Schools in Bay County, Florida. As an employee of Bay District Schools, Mr. Hale was eligible to participate in the FRS Investment Plan and, in fact, received distributions from that plan. Mr. Hale received a total distribution of $3,541.27, of which $1,705.80 were his own employee contributions.

3. Mr. Hale was employed by Bay District Schools for the 2015-2016 school year from August 18, 2015, through June 3, 2016. The victim in Mr. Hale's criminal case was a student at the high school where Mr. Hale taught. Mr. Hale met the victim at the school during the 2015-2016 school year.

4. Mr. Hale was never assigned to teach the student, but he did occasionally help the student with math problems while he was on morning "bus duty" in the school cafeteria. Mr. Hale credibly testified that he gave such help to any student who approached him during bus duty.

5. The student made no secret of her attraction to Mr. Hale during the 2015-2016 school year, but he was always quick to stop her flirting and to admonish her to behave in an appropriate manner.

6. Mr. Hale testified that he learned in mid-May 2016 that Bay District Schools would not be renewing his contract.

7. Mr. Hale was eventually re-employed by Bay District Schools for the 2016-2017 school year. He was employed from August 8, 2016, to November 8, 2016. During the 2016-2017 school year, Mr. Hale worked at a middle school. The victim was still enrolled in Bay District Schools during the 2016-2017 school year but did not attend the school at which Mr. Hale was working.

8. Bay District Schools policy 3.141, in effect at all times of Mr. Hale's employment, stated that employees, such as Mr. Hale, had a duty to refrain

from inappropriately associating with students, from engaging in unacceptable relationships with students, and from engaging in unacceptable communications with students. The prohibitions included any sexual behavior or sexual comments and applied regardless of where the teacher was employed, or the student was enrolled.

9. As a teacher, Mr. Hale was also subject to the Principles of Professional Conduct for the Education Profession in Florida, found in Florida Administrative Code Rule 6A-10.081. The Principles of Professional Conduct expressly state that an educator is obligated to "make reasonable effort to protect the student from conditions harmful to learning and/or to the student's mental and/or physical health and/or safety" and to "not exploit a relationship with a student for personal gain or advantage." Fla. Admin. Code R. 6A-10.081(2)(a)1. and 8.[3]

10. Despite these responsibilities, Mr. Hale exchanged contact information with the victim on or about June 1, 2016, the last day of the 2015-2016 school year and two days prior to the expiration of his contract with Bay District Schools. Mr. Hale denied that he made this exchange with any idea of engaging in a romantic or sexual relationship with the student, but he admitted that he had no legitimate reason to exchange personal contact information with the student.

11. Mr. Hale began exchanging text messages with the student. By June 8, 2016, the relationship had progressed to the point where Mr. Hale and the student met in person. Mr. Hale admitted that he kissed the student

[3] Mr. Hale argues that the SBA failed to prove that he was aware of either rule 6A-10.081 or Bay District Schools policy 3.141 at the time he committed his crimes. The general rule is that every person is presumed to know the law and ignorance of the law is no excuse. *Davis v. State*, 928 So. 2d 442, 448 (Fla. 5th DCA 2006). Likewise, a professional should be presumed to know the rules of his profession and an employee should be presumed to know the policies of his employer. The undersigned finds some precedent in professional discipline cases for considering ignorance of the law as a ground for a reduced penalty where the violation was technical, or the professional was acting on advice of counsel. *See, e.g., Fla. Real Estate Comm. v. Royce*, Case No. 76-1181 (Fla. DOAH Oct. 18, 1976; Fla. Real Estate Comm. June 22, 1977). However, the undersigned finds no authority for ignorance of the law as a defense where the offense is *malum in se*, as is the case here.

on that occasion and thereafter began exchanging sexually explicit messages with the student.

12. Mr. Hale credibly testified that the student was the instigator and the aggressor in starting the relationship. He also conceded that as the responsible adult involved, he was at fault for everything that transpired.

13. Mr. Hale testified that he put a halt to the relationship on June 13, 2016, and that he had no further communication with the student until mid-September, after the start of the 2016-2017 school year. At that time, the victim reached out to Mr. Hale and the text messaging between Mr. Hale and the victim recommenced. They met in person and their romantic relationship was rekindled. They remained in contact through at least mid-October 2016.[4]

14. Law enforcement was eventually alerted to the relationship. The cell phones of both Mr. Hale and the victim were obtained by the police, which led to Mr. Hale being criminally charged.

15. In an Amended Information filed by the State Attorney for the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit, Mr. Hale was charged as follows:

> Count I: Matthew Jay Hale, from on or about May 1, 2016 and continuing through on or about October 25, 2016, in the County of Bay and State of Florida, knowingly and unlawfully utilized a computer on-line service, Internet service or local bulletin board service or any other device capable of electronic data storage or transmission to seduce, solicit, lure or entice or attempt to seduce, solicit, lure or entice a child or another person believed by Matthew Jay Hale to be a child to commit any illegal act described in Chapter 794, Chapter 800, or Chapter 827, or to otherwise engage in any other unlawful sexual conduct, contrary to Florida Statute 847.0135(3).
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> Count II: Matthew Jay Hale, from on or about May 1, 2016 and continuing through on or about October 25, 2016, in the County of Bay and State of

[4] Mr. Hale testified without contradiction in the record that the victim was unaware he had been rehired by Bay District Schools at the time they recommenced their relationship.

Florida, did travel to, from or within this state for the purpose of engaging in any illegal act described in Chapter 794, Chapter 800, or Chapter 827, or to otherwise engage in any other unlawful sexual conduct with a child or with another person believed by Matthew Jay Hale to be a child after using a computer on-line service, Internet service or local bulletin board service or any other device capable of electronic data storage or transmission to seduce, solicit, lure, or entice or attempt to seduce, solicit, lure, or entice a child or another person believed by Matthew Jay Hale to be a child, to engage in any illegal act described in Chapter 794, Chapter 800, or Chapter 827, or to otherwise engage in other unlawful sexual conduct with a child, contrary to Florida Statute 847.0135(4).

Count III: Matthew Jay Hale, on October 10, 2016, in the County of Bay and State of Florida, did travel to, from or within this state for the purpose of engaging in any illegal act described in Chapter 794, Chapter 800, or Chapter 827, or to otherwise engage in any other unlawful sexual conduct with a child or with another person believed by Matthew Jay Hale to be a child after using a computer on-line service, Internet service or local bulletin board service or any other device capable of electronic data storage or transmission to seduce, solicit, lure, or entice or attempt to seduce, solicit, lure, or entice or attempt to seduce, solicit, lure, or entice a child or another person believed by Matthew Jay Hale to be a child, to engage in any illegal act described in Chapter 794, Chapter 800, or Chapter 827, or to otherwise engage in other unlawful sexual conduct with a child, contrary to Florida Statute 847.0135(4).

Count IV: Matthew Jay Hale, from on or about May 1, 2016 and continuing through on or about October 25, 2016, in the County of Bay and State of Florida, did unlawfully engage in sexual activity with ____, a person 12 years of age or older but less than 16 years of age, by penetrating or having

> union with the victim's mouth with his penis, contrary to Florida Statute 800.04(4)(a).
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> Count V: Matthew Jay Hale, from on or about May 1, 2016 and continuing through on or about October 25, 2016, in the County of Bay and State of Florida, did unlawfully engage in sexual activity with ____, a person 12 years of age or older but less than 16 years of age, by penetrating or having union with the vagina of the victim with the mouth of Matthew Jay Hale, contrary to Florida Statute 800.04(4)(a).
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> Count VI: Matthew Jay Hale, from on or about May 1, 2016 and continuing through on or about October 25, 2016, in the County of Bay and State of Florida, did unlawfully engage in sexual activity with ____, a person 12 years of age or older but less than 16 years of age, by penetrating or having union with the victim's vagina with his penis, contrary to Florida Statute 800.04(4)(a).

16. Mr. Hale's criminal trial was held on January 30, 2019. Mr. Hale was found guilty as to Counts II and III, Traveling to Meet a Minor to Commit Unlawful Sexual Conduct, each of which was a second degree felony. He was also found guilty of Committing Unnatural and Lascivious Acts, lesser included crimes as to Counts IV and V, each of which was a second degree misdemeanor.

17. Mr. Hale's convictions were affirmed on appeal. *Hale v. State*, 316 So. 3d 679 (Fla. 1st DCA 2021)(*per curiam*).

18. Because of his felony convictions, Mr. Hale was notified by the SBA that his rights and benefits to the FRS Investment Plan were forfeited, except for accumulated contributions.

19. The first defense asserted by Mr. Hale in the instant case is that he was not an employee of Bay District Schools at the time his crimes were committed. His last day of work under his 2015-2016 contract was June 3, 2016, and his first day of work under his 2016-2017 contract was August 8,

2016. Mr. Hale contends that his crimes were committed during the summer interim period when he was out-of-contract. Therefore, the terms of section 112.3173(2)(e)6. would not apply because they require that the felony have been committed "by a public employee."

20. Whatever the legal merit of Mr. Hale's first defense, the facts do not support it. Count III of the Amended Information specifically alleged that Mr. Hale traveled to engage in unlawful sexual conduct with a child on October 10, 2016. Mr. Hale was an employee of Bay District Schools, and thus a "public employee," on October 10, 2016. Mr. Hale was found guilty of committing the crime alleged in Count III.

21. The SBA contends that Mr. Hale should also be found to have committed the crime alleged in Count II of the Amended Information while an employee of Bay District Schools. The SBA bases this contention on the fact that Count II alleges that Mr. Hale traveled to engage in unlawful sexual conduct with a child "from on or about May 1, 2016 and continuing through on or about October 25, 2016." Mr. Hale worked for Bay District Schools during some portion of the period of May 1, 2016, through October 25, 2016, and therefore should be deemed to have committed the crime alleged in Count II while an employee. The undersigned finds this contention unpersuasive. Despite the catch-all form of the allegation in the Amended Information, the evidence produced in both the criminal trial and the hearing in the instant case established that Mr. Hale's physical relationship with the student did not commence until his 2015-2016 contract had expired and he no longer worked for Bay District Schools. He did not travel to engage in unlawful sexual conduct with the victim prior to June 3, 2016. The

October 10, 2016, incident covered by Count III was the only felony that was shown to have occurred during Mr. Hale's employment.[5]

22. Mr. Hale argues that a distinction should be drawn between the time during which he taught at the school attended by his victim and the later time during which he taught at a middle school with no connection to the victim. The statute requires that the public employee use or attempt to use "the power, rights, privileges, duties, or position of his or her public office or employment position" to obtain a forbidden benefit. Mr. Hale argues that he was in a position to use his official authority over the victim only when he worked at the school she attended. Because his romantic relationship with the victim began only after he left that school, Mr. Hale argues that he cannot be found to have used or attempted to use power of his official position to influence the actions of the victim.

23. In support of his argument, Mr. Hale points out that all the meetings between the victim and him occurred off campus and outside of school hours. No school resources were used to advance his relationship with the victim. Mr. Hale held no leverage over the victim that could be attributed to his public employment.

24. Mr. Hale testified that the idea of pursuing a romantic relationship with the student did not occur to him until after his employment at her high school ended. The victim made multiple overtures to Mr. Hale while he was working at the high school, but he consistently declined her advances and advised the victim that such behavior was inappropriate.

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[5] It is not unreasonable to argue, as the SBA does, that the October 10, 2016, incident also brings Mr. Hale's conduct as a "public employee" within the ambit of the broad time period alleged in Count II. The undersigned has declined to accept this argument because, in the context of this forfeiture proceeding, it smacks of punishing Mr. Hale twice for the same incident. Mr. Hale's actions during the summer of 2016 were relevant to his criminal trial and thus justified his conviction under Count II, but those actions do not necessarily lead to a finding that Mr. Hale committed the felony alleged in Count II while he was a "public employee" under section 112.3173(2)(e)6. The result of the instant case is the same whether or not Mr. Hale is found to have committed the crime alleged in Count II while an employee of Bay District Schools.

25. The SBA responds that Mr. Hale, as a teacher with Bay District Schools, had a duty to refrain from inappropriate conduct with students. This duty applied regardless of where the student was enrolled. Mr. Hale's actions with the victim were made possible because of his position as a teacher with Bay District Schools. But for Mr. Hale's public employment with Bay District Schools, he would not have had access to the victim, would not have met the victim, would not have begun a relationship with the victim, and would not have committed the crimes against the victim. The SBA argues that Mr. Hale's convictions stemming from his relationship with the victim are thus "inseparably intertwined" with his position as a teacher. *Newmans v. Div. of Ret.*, 701 So. 2d 573, 577 (Fla. 1st DCA 1997).

26. For reasons more fully explained below, the SBA's argument is correct under the facts of this case. If Mr. Hale were accurate in his assertion that he did nothing more than meet the victim while he was employed at her high school, it would be difficult to find that he committed his crimes "through the use or attempted use of the power, rights, privileges, duties, or position of his or her public office or employment position" as required by section 112.3173(2)(e)6. The undersigned is cognizant of case law stating that a public employee has misused his position to commit a felony if the employee could not have committed the crime "but for the power, rights, privileges, or duties" of his public employment. Nonetheless, the undersigned is unpersuaded that the mere fact of Mr. Hale's meeting the victim at school would be sufficient, standing alone, to meet the requirements of section 112.3176(2)(e)6. The case law implies at least that some overt act leading to or forming part of the crime is required of the public employee to satisfy the "but for" test.

27. However, Mr. Hale did more than merely meet the victim while he was employed at the high school. On or about June 1, 2016, the last day of the school year, while he was still an employee of Bay District Schools, Mr. Hale exchanged personal contact information with the victim. He denied that he

did so with any intention of starting a romantic relationship but he also conceded that he had no legitimate reason to give the victim his contact information. From his dealings with the victim at school, Mr. Hale knew that she was attracted to him and seemed willing to pursue a romantic relationship. He testified that he repeatedly had to "shut down" the student when she began to speak inappropriately. Whatever specific intention he had formed in his mind, Mr. Hale had to know that he was playing with fire by trading contact information and inviting the student to get in touch with him over the summer. The facts establish that Mr. Hale set in motion the sequence of events that led to his imprisonment while he was still employed by Bay District Schools. Mr. Hale's overt acts while still working for Bay District Schools in early June 2016 satisfy the "but for" test urged by the SBA.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

28. The Division of Administrative Hearings has jurisdiction over the subject matter and the parties to this action pursuant to sections 120.569, 120.57(1), and 112.3173(5), Florida Statutes.

29. Respondent has the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that Petitioner has forfeited his FRS retirement benefits. *Wilson v. Dep't of Admin., Div. of Ret.*, 538 So. 2d 139 (Fla. 4th DCA 1989).

30. Article II, section 8(d) of the Florida Constitution, provides as follows:

> SECTION 8: Ethics in government.--A public office is a public trust. The people shall have the right to secure and sustain that trust against abuse. To assure this right:
>
> * * *
>
> (d) Any public officer or employee who is convicted of a felony involving a breach of public trust shall be subject to forfeiture of rights and privileges

> under a public retirement system or pension plan in such manner as may be provided by law.

31. This section of the Constitution is implemented in chapter 112, part III, of the Florida Statutes. The applicable version of the pension forfeiture statute is the one in effect on the date of the criminal acts leading to forfeiture. *See Busbee v. State Div. of Ret.,* 685 So. 2d 914, 916-17 (Fla. 1st DCA 1996). As noted in footnote 1, section 112.3173 has not been amended since 2012. Therefore, the version in effect at the time of Mr. Hale's alleged offenses in 2016 is the same as that currently in effect.

32. Because forfeitures are not favored in Florida, the pension forfeiture statute should be strictly construed. *Williams v. Christian*, 335 So. 2d 358, 361 (Fla. 1st DCA 1976).

33. Section 112.3173(3) provides in relevant part:

> (3) FORFEITURE.--Any public officer or employee who is convicted of a specified offense committed prior to retirement . . . shall forfeit all rights and benefits under any public retirement system of which he or she is a member, except for the return of his or her accumulated contributions as of the date of termination.

34. Section 112.3173(2)(a) provides that "conviction" and "convicted" mean an adjudication of guilt by a court of competent jurisdiction; a plea of guilty or of nolo contendere; a jury verdict of guilty when adjudication of guilt is withheld and the accused is placed on probation; or a conviction by the Senate of an impeachable offense.

35. Mr. Hale was found guilty by a jury of two counts of Traveling to Meet a Minor to Commit Unlawful Sexual Conduct, a second degree felony under section 847.0135(4). Mr. Hale's adjudication of guilt constitutes a "conviction" for purposes of section 112.3173(2)(a).

36. Section 112.3173(2)(e) provides:

> (2)(e) "Specified offense" means:
>
> 1. The committing, aiding, or abetting of an embezzlement of public funds;
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> 2. The committing, aiding, or abetting of any theft by a public officer or employee from his or her employer;
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> 3. Bribery in connection with the employment of a public officer or employee;
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> 4. Any felony specified in chapter 838, except ss. 838.15 and 838.16;
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> 5. The committing of an impeachable offense;
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> 6. The committing of any felony by a public officer or employee who, willfully and with intent to defraud the public or the public agency for which the public officer or employee acts or in which he or she is employed of the right to receive the faithful performance of his or her duty as a public officer or employee, realizes or obtains, or attempts to realize or obtain, a profit, gain, or advantage for himself or herself or for some other person through the use or attempted use of the power, rights, privileges, duties, or position of his or her public office or employment position; or
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> 7. The committing on or after October 1, 2008, of any felony defined in s. 800.04 against a victim younger than 16 years of age, or any felony defined in chapter 794 against a victim younger than 18 years of age, by a public officer or employee through the use or attempted use of power, rights, privileges, duties, or position of his or her public office or employment position.

37. The felonies for which Mr. Hale was convicted do not fit the definitions set forth in subparagraphs 1. through 5. or 7. of section 112.3173(2)(e). If Mr. Hale is to be subjected to the forfeiture of his pension, his offense must be

found to meet the conditions of the "catch-all" category set forth in subparagraph 6. of section 112.3173(2)(e). *Jenne v. State*, 36 So. 3d 738, 742 (Fla. 1st DCA 2010).

38. To constitute a "specified offense" under section 112.3173(2)(e)6., the offense in question must meet all of the following elements:

> (a) It is a felony;
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> (b) It was committed by a public employee;
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> (c) It was done willfully and with intent to defraud the public or the employee's public employer of the right to receive the faithful performance of the employee's duty;
>
> (d) It was done to obtain a profit, gain or advantage for the employee or some other person; and
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> (e) It was done through the use or attempted use of the power, rights, privileges, duties, or position of his public employment.

Bollone v. Dep't of Mgmt. Servs., 100 So. 3d 1276, 1280-81 (Fla.1st DCA 2012).

39. The SBA is not required to re-prove the criminal conviction but simply must show that a felony was committed by a public employee and the employee's conduct meets the remaining elements of section 112.3173(2)(e)6. *Cabezas v. Corcoran*, 293 So. 3d 602, 604 (Fla. 1st DCA 2020)(holding that "an administrative proceeding is not the forum to relitigate a criminal conviction imposed by a court of competent jurisdiction."); *Bollone*, 100 So. 3d at 1280 (""specified offense' is defined by the conduct of the public official, not by the elements of the crime for which the official was convicted")(*citing Jenne*, 36 So. 3d at 742)("any felony could qualify as a specified offense, so long as the remaining conditions in the statute have been met").

40. It is uncontested that Mr. Hale was convicted of two second degree felonies. Therefore, factor (a) of the "specified offense" test has been met.

41. Mr. Hale argues that he was not a "public employee" at the time he committed his offenses. However, as noted above, Count III of the Amended Information specifically alleged that Mr. Hale traveled to engage in unlawful sexual conduct with a child on October 10, 2016. Mr. Hale was an employee of Bay District Schools, and thus a "public employee," on October 10, 2016. Mr. Hale was found guilty of committing the crime alleged in Count III. Factor (b) of the "specified offense" test has been met.

42. Factor (c) requires a determination as to whether Mr. Hale committed the felonies willfully and with intent to defraud the public or his employer of the right to receive the faithful performance of his duty. An instructive case on this factor is *DeSoto v. Hialeah Police Pension Board of Trustees*, 870 So. 2d 844 (Fla. 3d DCA 2003). Mr. DeSoto was a Hialeah police officer who pled guilty to several charges, including conspiracy to possess and distribute cocaine, to commit robbery, and to carry a firearm during a crime of violence, as well as three robberies. In his appeal of the police pension board's decision that his benefits were subject to forfeiture, Mr. DeSoto argued that section 112.3173(2)(e)6. was inapplicable because his crimes were committed while he was on suspension and thus could not be related to his duties as a police officer.

43. The *DeSoto* court itemized Mr. DeSoto's extensive involvement in each crime and ultimately held that whether Mr. DeSoto was on active duty as a police officer was not controlling; rather, the statute requires establishment of "a nexus between the crimes charged against the public officer and his or her duties and/or position." *Id.* at 846. "… DeSoto clearly violated his duty as a public officer to safeguard the public faith in his office. Although suspended for a period of time, DeSoto remained a public servant." *Id.* The court affirmed the pension board's determination that Mr. DeSoto's conviction merited forfeiture of his pension rights.

44. Thus, violating a duty or oath can be sufficient to satisfy the nexus requirement as to factor (c). *See also Simcox v. City of Hollywood Police*

Officers' Ret. Sys., 988 So. 2d 731, 734 (Fla. 4th DCA 2008)("'Faithful performance' of a 'duty' as a police officer under [section 112.3173(2)(e)6.] does not allow an officer to traffic in drugs when off duty.").

45. Unlike the officer in *DeSoto*, Mr. Hale was not on suspension but was unemployed when at least some of his crimes were committed. Regardless of his employment status, however, Mr. Hale was a licensed teacher and had a professional duty to the public to refrain from inappropriate communications and relationships with underage students. The "faithful performance" of a teacher's "duty" does not allow the teacher to have romantic assignations with a student, regardless of whether or where the teacher is employed or where the student is enrolled. Bay District Schools and the public had the right to expect that Mr. Hale would not be convicted of sex crimes based on acts with a student. His actions were inimical to his professional status. Because Mr. Hale violated his direct duty to Bay District Schools as to his October 10, 2016, offense and violated his general duty to the public as a licensed teacher by engaging in a romantic relationship with a student, the nexus requirement is satisfied. Factor (c) of the "specified offense" test has been met.

46. Factor (d) requires a determination as to whether Mr. Hale committed the felonies to obtain a profit, gain, or advantage for himself or some other person. Case law is clear that profit, gain, or advantage is not limited to economic gain. A public employee commits a felony for profit, gain, or advantage, when the felony is committed to satisfy the employee's sexual or emotional gratification. *Cuenca v. State Bd. of Admin.*, 259 So. 3d 253, 259 (Fla. 3d DCA 2018); *Bollone*, 100 So. 3d at 1281-82 (possession of child pornography for personal gratification was "personal gain" for purposes of the statute). There is no question that Mr. Hale committed his offenses for his own sexual or emotional gratification. Factor (d) of the "specific offense" test has been satisfied.

47. Factor (e) requires a determination as to whether Mr. Hale committed the felonies through the use or attempted use of the power, rights, privileges, duties, or position of his public employment. The SBA argues that but for his public employment with Bay District Schools, Mr. Hale would not have met the victim. Mr. Hale's ensuing actions, though having no direct connection to his employment, are traced and attributed to his meeting the victim while he was employed at her school. Thus, the SBA asserts that Mr. Hale's convictions stemming from his relationship with the victim are "inseparably intertwined" with his position as a teacher.

48. At the outset, it is noted that the inquiry under factor (e) is narrower than under factor (c), which considers whether the employee "willfully and with intent to defraud" deprived the public or his employer of the right to receive the "faithful performance" of his duties. Factor (e) does not include language assessing the employee's intent and does not require consideration of the employee's duties to the wider public. Factor (e) focuses on the behavior of the employee *vis à vis* his public employer: did the employee misuse the "power, rights, privileges, duties, or position" of his public employment in the commission of a felony?

49. The *Bollone* court stated, "In fact, but for the power, rights, privileges, or duties of Appellant's public employment, Appellant would not have been able to use his TCC work computer to acquire, possess, or view child pornography." 100 So. 3d at 1282. As indicated by the quote, the case against Mr. Bollone did not hinge entirely on the "but for" statement; he clearly misused property entrusted to him as a public employee to commit criminal acts in the course of his employment.

50. Mr. Hale argues that the SBA has alleged no comparable misuse of his position. He argues that the only direct connection between his crimes and his employment is that he met the student while on the job and had some casual, unobjectionable teacher-student interactions. The criminal activity

occurred after Mr. Hale was in any position to misuse his status as a teacher in the school attended by his victim.

51. The SBA cites several prior DOAH orders as authority for its "but for" argument, correctly noting that in each case the ALJ concluded that but for the fact of public employment, the perpetrator would not have been in a position to commit his crime. However, in none of these cases was the mere fact that the public employee met a victim while on the job found sufficient to establish that the employee used the "power, rights, privileges, duties, or position of his public employment" to commit his crime.

52. *Moran v. State Board of Administration*, Case No. 17-5785 (Fla. DOAH May 15, 2018; Fla. SBA July 3, 2018), involved a Department of Corrections ("DOC") corrections officer convicted of conspiracy to commit the murder of a former inmate. The SBA contends that this case supports its "but for" argument because the forfeiture was ordered even though the corrections officer conspired to kill the former inmate after the inmate was released and no longer in custody.

53. *Contra* the SBA, the deciding factor is not the location of the victim or his proximity to the public employee's workplace. The deciding factor is whether the public employee used his position in furtherance of the felony he committed. In *Moran*, the corrections officer was found to have conspired with other DOC employees to commit the crime. He was also found to have used his position to ensure that the crime would occur when Officer Thomas Driver, whose grudge against the former inmate inspired the conspiracy, would be at work and thereby have an alibi. *Moran* at ¶ 18. Mr. Hale argues that the record in the instant case is bare of similar facts showing him using his position to facilitate his crimes.

54. In *Maradey v. State Board of Administration*, Case No. 13-4172 (Fla. DOAH Jan. 16, 2014; Fla. SBA Apr. 4, 2014), the ALJ concluded that "[b]ut for her employment with MDT [Miami-Dade Transit], Petitioner would not have become involved in the criminal activity to which she pled guilty/nolo

contendere…." *Maradey* at ¶ 45. The facts established that Ms. Maradey used her position to recruit fellow MDT bus drivers to participate in an insurance fraud scheme in which a medical provider paid patients kickbacks from insurance payments. She exploited her knowledge of her fellow employees' physical and financial conditions to recruit them for the medical provider. She was promised additional payments for this recruitment of her fellow bus drivers. Mr. Hale contends that there is no evidence in the instant case of him exploiting his position to further a criminal scheme.

55. *Holsberry v. Department of Management Services*, Case No. 09-0087 (Fla. DOAH July 24, 2009; Fla. DMS Oct. 19, 2009), involved a teacher who pled guilty to child abuse of a student at the school where he taught. The ALJ concluded that his "contact with [student] R.D. was made possible only as a result of his position as a teacher." *Holsberry* at ¶ 37. The facts established in *Holsberry* are not detailed but do make it clear that whatever went on between Mr. Holsberry and the student occurred at the school where he was teaching, thus distinguishing that case from the instant proceeding.

56. Mr. Hale contends that the facts of the instant case do not establish that he was in a position of authority over his victim. He was not the victim's teacher and his only at-school interaction with the victim was some occasional math tutoring in the cafeteria. Nothing inappropriate happened at the school or while Mr. Hale was employed by Bay District Schools, with the exception of the October 10, 2016, incident, by which time Mr. Hale was teaching at a different school.

57. Mr. Hale argues that "it is unreasonable to say the mere act of meeting someone through one's employment means that all future interactions with that person occur through the use of the employment position." Mr. Hale presented a hypothetical to illustrate the unreasonableness of the SBA's position. A public employee meets someone in the course of his work. The two people pursue the relationship while the employee is off duty and they eventually get married. After twenty years of

marriage, the employee is convicted of a felony against the spouse, entirely unrelated to his role as a public employee. Following the SBA's logic, the employee's retirement benefits would be forfeited because the employee would never have met the spouse but for his public employment, despite the fact that such meeting was the sole connection between the crime and the place of employment.

58. The undersigned agrees that it is unreasonable to say that merely meeting someone on the job means that all future interactions are attributable to the use of the employment position. The undersigned agrees that merely making the victim's acquaintance while at work is too slender a thread with which to establish that Mr. Hale's crimes were "inseparably intertwined" with his position as a teacher. *Newmans*, 701 So. 2d at 577. The case law cited above supports the idea that the "but for" test requires some overt act by the employee over and above simply meeting the victim at work.

59. Unfortunately for Mr. Hale, the facts of this case demonstrate that he undertook such an overt act by exchanging personal contact information with the victim while he was still employed by the high school at which the victim was a student. Mr. Hale admitted there was no legitimate reason to do this. He was aware that the student was attracted to him and still chose to give her this encouragement. Despite his denial of any intent to pursue a romantic relationship with the student, Mr. Hale had to know where his actions might lead. If Mr. Hale had maintained a professional distance from the student while he was still in a position of authority at her school, the subsequent disaster might never have occurred. This was the act that began the cascade of events that led to Mr. Hale's disgrace, criminal conviction, imprisonment, and loss of career, and it occurred while Mr. Hale was a public employee. This was the act that satisfied the "but for" test and established that Mr. Hale's crimes were inseparably intertwined with his position as a teacher.

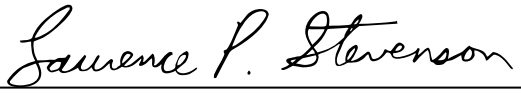
60. It is concluded that factor (e) of the "specific offense" test has been satisfied. The SBA has therefore proved by a preponderance of the evidence

that Petitioner has forfeited his FRS retirement benefits under section 112.3173(2)(e)6.

RECOMMENDATION

Based upon the foregoing Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, it is RECOMMENDED that the State Board of Administration enter a final order determining that Matthew J. Hale forfeited all his rights and benefits under the Florida Retirement System, except for the return of any accumulated contributions, when he was convicted of "specified offenses" committed during employment.

DONE AND ENTERED this 3rd day of February, 2022, in Tallahassee, Leon County, Florida.



LAWRENCE P. STEVENSON
Administrative Law Judge
1230 Apalachee Parkway
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-3060
(850) 488-9675
www.doah.state.fl.us

Filed with the Clerk of the
Division of Administrative Hearings
this 3rd day of February, 2022.

COPIES FURNISHED:

Matthew J. Hale, DC# F90279
Madison Correctional Institution
382 Southwest MCI Way
Madison, Florida 32340

Jonathan W. Taylor, Esquire
Moffa, Sutton & Donnini, P.A.
Trade Center South, Suite 930
100 West Cypress Creek Road
Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33309

Rex D. Ware, Esquire
Moffa, Sutton & Donnini, P.A.
Suite 330
3500 Financial Plaza
Tallahassee, Florida 32312

Ash Williams, Executive Director &
Chief Investment Officer
State Board of Administration
1801 Hermitage Boulevard, Suite 100
Post Office Box 13300
Tallahassee, Florida 32317-3300

NOTICE OF RIGHT TO SUBMIT EXCEPTIONS

All parties have the right to submit written exceptions within 15 days from the date of this Recommended Order. Any exceptions to this Recommended Order should be filed with the agency that will issue the Final Order in this case.