

November 9, 2006

Hon. Joel I. Klein  
Chancellor  
New York City Public Schools  
Department of Education  
52 Chambers Street, Room 314  
New York, NY 10007

Re: Hillary Stringfellow  
Kendra Newkirk  
Sharion Thomas  
Tiffany Washington  
SCI Case #2006-1634

Dear Chancellor Klein:

An investigation conducted by this office has substantiated that Acorn High School for Social Justice (“Acorn”) Teacher Hillary Stringfellow had inappropriate interaction with a nineteen-year-old male student (“Student A”) and an eighteen-year-old male student (“Student B”).<sup>1</sup> The investigation also substantiated that Acorn Teachers Kendra Newkirk and Sharion Thomas and Acorn Paraprofessional Tiffany Washington mishandled a sexual complaint.<sup>2</sup> Although Newkirk, Thomas, and Washington knew about a serious allegation made against Stringfellow, they did not report it to the Acorn administration or to this office. Instead, they investigated the matter on their own.

This investigation began in May 2006, when Acorn Assistant Principal Henry Telfer contacted the office of the Special Commissioner of Investigation (“SCI”) to lodge a report made by Stringfellow who had heard rumors from unidentified students and staff members that Stringfellow was having a sexual relationship with an unnamed student.

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<sup>1</sup> Hillary Stringfellow was not reassigned during this investigation. Student B has turned nineteen-years-old.

<sup>2</sup> Kendra Newkirk, Sharion Thomas, and Tiffany Washington were not reassigned during this investigation.

SCI investigators interviewed Acorn Principal Joseph Parker who stated that Stringfellow informed him that she had heard rumors about herself. Specifically, that she was having a sexual relationship with Student A and Student B. According to Parker, Stringfellow said that Newkirk, Thomas, and Washington interviewed Student A and Student B, as well as another eighteen-year-old female student (“Student C”), after being told of the allegation by Student C.<sup>3</sup> Parker added that he had not been notified of the allegation by Newkirk, Thomas, or Washington.

SCI investigators interviewed Kendra Newkirk who stated that, on April 28, 2006, Student C informed her that she had overheard Student A and Student B talking about their sexual encounters with Stringfellow. Newkirk added that she, Thomas, and Washington conducted their own investigation. They interviewed Student A, Student B, and Student C and then informed Stringfellow about the allegation. Newkirk said that she did not report the information because the statements made by Student A and Student B which were overheard by Student C could have been lies and she did not want to implicate Stringfellow if the allegations were not true.

On May 16, 2006, SCI investigators interviewed Tiffany Washington who stated that, about two or three weeks earlier, she was approached by Newkirk who informed her that Student C had overheard Student A and Student B say that they had “been with” Stringfellow. Washington said that she did not remember any other details about the allegation. Washington added that Newkirk brought Student C into her classroom and the girl reiterated what Student A and Student B had said about Stringfellow. Washington again maintained that she did not remember any other details about the allegation. According to Washington, along with Newkirk and Thomas, she interviewed Student A and Student B who denied the allegation. Washington also reported that she learned that Thomas had observed Stringfellow and Student A get into a car after a basketball game. In addition, Washington said that she had observed an inappropriate picture on Stringfellow’s classroom wall and that Thomas had instructed Stringfellow to take it down. Washington claimed that she was unable to recall what was in the picture.

SCI investigators interviewed Sharion Thomas who stated that, sometime in March 2006, she observed Stringfellow and Student A get into a car together after a school basketball game. Thomas added that she later questioned the teacher and the boy and they both denied any inappropriate behavior. Thomas also said that there was a picture drawn by Student A, depicting himself and Stringfellow, which hung on Stringfellow’s classroom wall. According to Thomas, on the drawing was written “Buck Rogers,” a nickname for Student A, “and Noel,” referring to Stringfellow, “together forever.” According to Thomas, Student C reported overhearing Student A and Student B say that they had sex with Stringfellow. Thomas acknowledged that she, Newkirk, and

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<sup>3</sup> Student C has turned nineteen-years-old.

Washington interviewed Student A and Student B who denied the allegation. Thomas added that she informed Stringfellow about the allegation and that neither she nor Newkirk nor Washington notified anyone about the sexual complaint.

Investigators obtained the picture or drawing to which Washington and Thomas had referred. Its actual content differs from Thomas's description of it. On the left hand side was written: "Hilary [*sic*] Noel Stringfellow & Buck."<sup>4</sup> Facial sketches of the teacher and the boy are found next to those words. It is then signed, as an artist would, "Buck Rogers" followed by what appears to be "B. 4 @." It also seems that the original drawing included only Stringfellow and the depiction of Student A was, literally, stapled on afterward.

SCI investigators interviewed Student C who confirmed that she had overheard Student A and Student B discussing that they both had sex with Stringfellow. According to Student C, Student B said "Oh shit," when he saw her within listening range. Student C added that when Newkirk, Thomas, and Washington questioned her about the allegation, Newkirk said that she believed Student C because Newkirk had seen Stringfellow buy food at McDonald's for Student A and Student B.

SCI investigators interviewed Student A who said that he went out to eat with Stringfellow after a basketball game in March 2006, but nothing inappropriate happened. Student A denied having a relationship or having sex with Stringfellow. Student A added that he was questioned by Newkirk, Thomas, and Washington about a false rumor that Student C was spreading. Student A acknowledged that he "talked on the phone a lot" with Stringfellow, but denied making the statements that Student C said she overheard.

On May 16, 2006, investigators interviewed Student B who stated that he had been in Stringfellow's class since September 2005. Student B stated that, on occasion, he had spoken to Stringfellow on her cell phone and for a short period of time she called him every morning to wake him up. Student B added that he and Stringfellow discussed school work and personal things, but nothing inappropriate. Student B also said that Stringfellow took him, Student A, and other students to McDonald's and for pizza on occasion. According to Student B, about two weeks earlier, he and Student A were questioned by Thomas, Newkirk, and Washington about having had sex with Stringfellow. Student B reported that they denied the allegation and accused Student C of lying.

SCI investigators interviewed Hillary Stringfellow who denied having a sexual relationship with Student A or Student B. Stringfellow explained that, in March 2006, she met Student A in Queens for a school basketball game at York College and afterward

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<sup>4</sup> Apparently, Stringfellow's middle name is Noel.

she arranged for Teacher Allison Reilly to provide a ride for her and Student A to Brooklyn.<sup>5</sup> Stringfellow continued that she treated Student A to dinner at a Spanish restaurant and then got ice cream afterward. Stringfellow said that Student A took the train home while Stringfellow took the train to Reilly's house and then went out with Reilly.<sup>6</sup> Stringfellow added that, on March 13, 2006, Thomas instructed Stringfellow to take down a picture depicting herself and Student A, drawn by the student, which was hanging in her classroom. According to Stringfellow, on March 14, 2006, Student A called her in a panic and said that Thomas and Washington had questioned him about his relationship with Stringfellow.

Stringfellow continued that, on April 28, 2006, she received a call from Newkirk who informed her that Student C had made an allegation against Stringfellow. Stringfellow added that she later received a call from Student B who told her that he and Student A were questioned by Newkirk, Thomas, and Washington regarding the allegation made by Student C. Stringfellow said that the next day she received a call from Newkirk who informed her that Newkirk, Thomas, and Washington had interviewed Student A and Student B, both of whom had denied saying they spoke about having sex with Stringfellow. According to Stringfellow, she told Newkirk, Thomas, and Washington that she was going to tell the school's administration about the allegation and they all said not to do so because the administration was too new and would report the allegation immediately.

Stringfellow acknowledged having telephone contact with both Student A and Student B. She informed investigators that she called Student A approximately 10 times and Student B once every other week during the first semester and every morning during the second semester to wake him up. Stringfellow added that she never provided a wake up call to any other student.

A review of records relating to Stringfellow's cell phone use revealed a total of 124 calls made to Student A and Student B between October 1, 2005, and May 23, 2006: 56 calls to Student A and 68 calls to Student B. Many of the calls to Student B were between 6:45 a.m. and 6:55 a.m. In fact, frequently these morning calls occurred back to back, presumably because Student B did not wake up to pick up the first or second time. The records also showed that Stringfellow's cell phone received 15 calls from Student A's home telephone between November 4, 2005 and June 12, 2006, the latest call made at 11:43 p.m. There were no records available for Student B's home telephone.

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<sup>5</sup> In an interview with investigators, Reilly confirmed that she gave Stringfellow and Student A a ride to a train station in Brooklyn.

<sup>6</sup> Reilly confirmed that she went out with Stringfellow that night.

It is the recommendation of this office that appropriate disciplinary action be taken against Hillary Stringfellow.

Newkirk, Thomas, and Washington failed to report the complaint lodged by Student C and, instead, handled the allegations themselves.<sup>7</sup> They compounded those errors by attempting to dissuade Stringfellow from reporting the information. It is the recommendation of this office that the employment of Kendra Newkirk, Sharion Thomas, and Tiffany Washington be terminated, that they be made ineligible for future work with the Department of Education, and that this matter be considered should any of them apply for a position in the New York City school system in the future.

We are sending a copy of this letter and of our report concerning this investigation to the Office of Legal Services. We also are forwarding our findings to the New York State Education Department for whatever action it deems appropriate. Should you have any inquiries regarding the above, please contact First Deputy Commissioner Regina Loughran, the attorney assigned to the case. She can be reached at (212) 510-1426. Please notify First Deputy Commissioner Loughran within thirty days of receipt of this letter of what, if any, action has been taken or is contemplated concerning Hillary Stringfellow, Kendra Newkirk, Sharion Thomas, and Tiffany Washington. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

RICHARD J. CONDON  
Special Commissioner  
of Investigation for the  
New York City School District

By: \_\_\_\_\_

Regina A. Loughran  
First Deputy Commissioner

RJC:RAL:gm

c: Michael Best, Esq.  
Theresa Europe, Esq.

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<sup>7</sup> This was the second occasion where Thomas and Washington questioned Student A about Stringfellow. The first time was in March after Thomas saw them at the basketball game. They did not report that information either. When questioned by SCI investigators, Washington claimed not to remember details about the allegation made by Student C or the picture drawn by Student A.