

New Bedford woman, Fairhaven school department employee convicted of stealing more than \$100,000

A 55-year-old New Bedford woman, who while serving as the Fairhaven Public School Department's Business Office Manager stole at least \$100,000, was convicted in New Bedford District Court this week of Larceny over \$250 by a Single Scheme, Bristol County District Attorney Thomas M. Quinn III announced.

Christine E. Mitchell pleaded guilty to the charge on Tuesday and was sentenced by Judge Patrick J. Malone to two years in the Bristol County House of Corrections. However due to the defendant's serious current medical condition, the judge suspended the sentence for five years, meaning she will be on supervised probation for five years. If the defendant were to commit a new crime during the next five years, she could be forced to serve the entire two year jail term. Judge Malone also ordered the defendant to pay the Fairhaven School Department \$1,000 in restitution, which equals the amount the school department had to pay to its insurance company as its deductible.

The defendant was an employee of the Fairhaven public schools for more than 15 years, and in her most recent role, served as the business office manager. In October of 2018, when the defendant took an unexpected medical leave, it was discovered there were a variety of discrepancies in school finances that were under the direct control of the defendant. School officials were able to confront the defendant with their findings when she was back in the office. During that meeting, the defendant could not provide explanations, but prior to

being terminated, handed over a resignation letter that ended with "I'm so sorry."

Fairhaven public schools retained an accounting firm to conduct a forensic audit. That auditing report revealed a pattern of theft that totaled over \$100,000. Specifically, the defendant stole \$89,893 from the Student Activities funds and the preschool fund from 2015-2018 and also wrote herself unauthorized checks totaling \$10,892 in 2011-2012 for a grand total \$100,785. In regards to the theft from the student activities funds and preschool fund, this defendant would take possession of checks and cash, but only deposit the checks – never the cash. She would manipulate internal records to cover up the theft. Due to the cost of the audit and policy coverage, the school was unable to dig deeper back into the defendant's time employed with the department. The insurance policy covered the school department's loss, but the school had to pay an out-of-pocket deductible of \$1,000.00.

The defendant has been suffering from a serious disease during the pendency of this case. A subset of her medical records was submitted to the judge for consideration of probation vs. jail time. The defense argued that a jail sentence was effectively a death sentence based on her current state of health.

Assistant District Attorney Madalyn Fairbanks argued that years of deception and theft warranted jail time, but a shorter period was recommended in light of the defendant's health issues. Taking the health concerns into account, the Commonwealth argued for a two year jail term with six months to serve and the balance suspended for two years. The Commonwealth also argued for the \$1,000 restitution. The defendant's criminal behavior affected a public school, children who worked to raise money, and members of the Fairhaven community.

"I am pleased the defendant was held accountable for stealing a substantial amount of money from school department funds.

This was a clear breach of trust to the town, the school committee, the children and the citizens of Fairhaven," District Attorney Quinn said.