

UPPAC INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

Eliza Jane Wilder

UPPAC Case No. 52-1234

DOB: January 3, 1850

District: Winoka County School District

School: Walnut Grove School

Licensure Route: Minneapolis College

Date: December 15, 1853

Investigator: Sarah Carter

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Miss Eliza Jane Wilder had an inappropriate relationship with an eighth-grade student, which included texting, social media messaging, gift-giving, hugs and a kiss on the forehead.

SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATION

Miss Wilder holds a Professional license with an area of concentration in Elementary Education and an Endorsement in ESL, which expires on June 30, 2025. Miss Wilder has been a teacher since 1845. Miss Wilder taught at the Walnut Grove School, “School,” in the Winoka County School District (“District”), from July 1, 1847 to May 11, 1852. Miss Wilder currently teaches at St. Louis Academy, from July 1, 1852 to the present.

On January 21, 1852, assistant principal at Winoka County Junior High School (“WCJH”), Etta Plum, received a report that an 8th grade student (“Student”) had been communicating via Instagram with Miss Wilder. Assistant coach Nellie Olson reported Student was on her girls’ stickball team. Student had approached Miss Olson about a person messaging her and making her feel scared. Student said the person messaging her was a teacher, Eliza Jane Wilder, who Student had become acquainted with several years earlier, when Miss Wilder was her brother’s teacher. Student reported Miss Wilder was upset that Student was paying more attention to her coach during stickball games than to Miss Wilder. Student claimed Miss Wilder told her via texting that Student had to choose between Miss Wilder or Coach Olson, and Student must choose “to either love [Wilder] with her whole heart or not” because Miss Wilder can’t share Student with her coach.

Miss Olson reported that she was shown the screenshots of the text messages reportedly sent by Miss Wilder before Student deleted them. The messages Miss Olson recalled observing included the following statements: Miss Wilder had done too much work with Student to have Student not care about her anymore, and that the coach was bad for Student and gave a bad vibe. Miss Olson reported Student told her that Miss Olson wanted to move to Hero Township with Student after Student graduated from high school and that she would fight for custody from Student’s parents. Student also told Miss Olson she was scared Miss Wilder was waiting for her in the parking lot after stickball games. Student informed Miss Olson that Miss Wilder had created an Instagram account with hashtag references to Student.

After the report was made to Miss Plum, the District began an internal investigation. Miss Wilder's Instagram account was located, with the profile name of: Almanzo's sister. There were hundreds of posts and memes promoting positive body image and positive mental health attitude. In just two of these posts, Miss Plum found the following hashtags ([] will be substituted for student's first name):

#[]ismypreciousgirl; #[]ismybaby; #[]ismynumberone; #[]ismyfavorite;
#[]ismyangelbaby; #[]issolovedandadored; #[]isbeautiful; #[]isthesweetest;
#[]isacreationofheaven; #[]isanexampletome; #[]isamazing; #[]ismyadopteddaughter;
#alltheseareabout[]; #[]ismyreason; #[]ismysunshine; #[]ismynumberone; and #[]isloved.

Instagram post found during the LEA's internal investigation:

Beyond grateful for you sweet angel girl. And each of these things. I'm thankful for our closeness, for our bond and relationship. You are such a blessing to me. You make me happy. I love you beyond words. You are such a joy to be around. As you know, the time passes by in a blink of an eye when I am with you. I treasure each second with you. And you in my arms is my favorite.

You are such a beautiful soul. You have the most pure and gorgeous heart I've ever seen. And you're practically perfect in every way.

Thank you for being the best part of my 1851. I can't wait for more memories with you in 1852.

Upon the conclusion of the district's internal investigation, Miss Wilder was terminated for cause. However, she chose to resign after the pre-termination meeting to avoid the termination. UPPAC opened an investigation on June 15, 1852.

Written Statement by Student on 1/24/52:

We have messaged on Instagram since the end of my 7th grade year. She messaged to check in on me. In the beginning it was normal [then] over time it got worse. She then made an Instagram account. I didn't know it was for me. She messaged me the whole summer. I didn't hear from her until this year during a basketball game. We talked after the basketball game. After the basketball game, she messaged me saying that at the game I was preoccupied by coach Olson and didn't even talk to her. She was mad at me because I was giving all my attention to Coach Olson. She said she wanted me to choose between her or Coach Olson. She said she didn't want to share me. We messaged back and forth for a while. She messaged me saying 'I'm sorry for making your parents seem like bad people.'

Written Statement by Educator on 1/15/52:

I created an account on Instagram in support of mental health issues. [Student] found out about it and started following it she often felt like it was geared for her. I tried my best to

put goodness out there in support of her to uplift and help her overcome some challenges she had opened up to me about. [Student] was someone who was seeking love and attention and I tried to be a safe adult she could confide in. She really struggles with feelings of suicide and body image and stuff. The account was a way to try to spread some goodness as well as to her. I started the account to learn more about mental health. I have hugged her and it was always appropriate. I did kiss her forehead one time. She often told me she loved me like a mom figure in her life and I told her I loved her like my own kids. I took her Christmas presents because she basically asked me to do. So I was just trying to spread goodness and give back. The hashtags were also something [student] asked me to add in and then I just kind of did it as a habit. I deleted followers and made the account private because I spoke with Rev. Alden. I had been wanting to delete the account and hadn't so doing what I did was my way of keeping it for myself.

Written Statement by Educator on 05/10/1852:

The statement I emailed to Carolyn Ingalls on 2/1/1852 expresses my feelings on a deeply personal level. In addition to that statement, I want to reiterate that I realize in my efforts to be a trusting adult that it was simply too much. I want it to be very clear that my intentions were to help. Good intentions sometimes cloud good judgment. I realize that my good judgment in this case may have been clouded by my good intentions to be helpful. I have learned from this experience. It is my sincere hope that the Winona County District employees take into consideration that all people make mistakes and that they learn from them. With a second chance I can prove to you that I have changed, grown and learned from this experience. I thank you for your time and your consideration on my behalf.

Interview of Isaiah Edwards, former WCJH principal:

Mr. Edwards said when Student initially reported being scared about the communication with Miss Wilder, he had a meeting with Student and her father. He did not observe any negative impact on Student afterwards. Mr. Edwards said when Student made the girls' stickball team, she seemed happy, and the rest of the 2021-2022 school year went well for her. He recalled Student's grades had improved after the misconduct was reported.

Etta Plum, former WCJH Assistant Principal:

Miss Plum recalled that Student's father was not willing to meet with her or put anything in writing about Miss Wilder and his daughter. The father did not want anything to happen to Miss Wilder, and he didn't want outside mental health treatment provided for his daughter. Miss Plum said Student was upset with her for Miss Wilder's resignation and would not talk to her for the rest of the school year. However, the following year, Student returned as a 9th grader and was "happy and bubbly," and Student would come up to Miss Plum and talk with her.

Alice Garvey, Director of Walnut Grove School:

Mrs. Garvey said that Miss Wilder had been a great teacher. She considered Miss Wilder's conduct as a "gross misjudgment, especially since the student was never Miss Wilder's former student." She believes Miss Wilder should be given a second chance and continue to be a teacher.

Adam Kendall, Principal of Walnut Grove School:

Mr. Kendall said he was not involved in District's investigation of Miss Wilder and does not know much of the details. He said Miss Wilder was a great teacher; very interested in her students; he had no concerns prior to the incident; believes she had started with good intentions with the communication of Student but got carried away; she always had former students coming back to visit her; and she made positive impacts in her students' lives. He thinks that Miss Wilder did not understand the seriousness of the situation when it was occurring. When asked if there was anything he would want UPPAC to consider, he said he doesn't think Miss Wilder's license should be suspended. "Her heart and soul is teaching and she makes positive impact on kids." When asked if he would feel comfortable with her teaching in his school again, he said there would be too many rumors within the community and other teachers to have her return, however, if he was a principal at a different school, then he would be comfortable having her teach there.

Response by educator, Eliza Jane Wilder:

Miss Wilder stated she still feels the same way as she did when she wrote her previous 1852 statements, and that everyone makes mistakes and learns from them. She reported deep regrets of the situation and, after getting out of the situation, she can view the circumstances differently. She acknowledged how her communication with Student comes across to others, that she dug a hole and has been digging herself out of the hole ever since.

During the internal investigation, she was told by the HR director that it is impossible to be manipulated by a child. Miss Wilder disagrees with that statement. She felt Student had manipulated her by often discussing her depression and mental health issues. Miss Wilder now believes that the mental health issues might not have been true but was used as leverage to get things from her, including attention and gifts. Miss Wilder stated she felt overwhelmed and was naïve in the situation.

Miss Wilder stated Student had discovered her Instagram account, followed it, and made comments to her posts. Ms. Miss Wilder said Student began to make the account all about herself and Student believed the account had been created especially for her. Miss Wilder denies the account was made for Student, but she played along to uplift Student.

When discussing the incident of sending messages to Student during stickball games, Miss Wilder stated Student would often make remarks that Miss Olson was doing more for her than Miss Wilder was. Student would tell Miss Wilder the coach was helping her with her problems in a way Miss Wilder was not. Miss Wilder believes Student was saying those things to manipulate her into giving her more attention and provide even more help to her.

Regarding the Christmas gifts, Miss Wilder confirmed that she had provided upwards of 13 presents to Student. She said it was done in response to Student making statements that her family didn't celebrate the holiday and would not be receiving gifts. Miss Wilder stated in previous years she would provide gifts to families in need. Miss Wilder said Student knew about the previous years of gift giving and commented that Miss Wilder was showing favoritism and was not showing Student she cared about her like Miss Wilder had shown others. Miss Wilder said she felt bad for Student, especially since the school has many low-income families. When asked about the specific gifts she had provided Student, she said she spent less than \$70. The gifts she recalled giving were a Minky blanket (Miss Wilder said her cousin works for the company and receives many of these blankets for free and did not spend her money for this gift, a positive mental attitude sign, lotion, music box, stuffed animal, sweatshirt, candy, and was unable to recall the other gifts.

When asked about the allegation she had offered to move to Hero Township with Student after high school, Miss Wilder stated the Hero Township comment was made only as a joke. When asked about the allegation that she would fight Student's parents for custody, Miss Wilder said she does not recall ever making this statement. Miss Wilder said she would often say things she thought Student wanted to hear and did it to convey she was a mother figure.

Miss Wilder is currently teaching at St. Louis Academy. She expressed gratitude for this teaching opportunity. Miss Wilder reports her new employer is aware of the flag on her cactus and that there is a boundary misconduct investigation. When asked if there was anything she wanted UPPAC to consider, she said she had felt overwhelmed and manipulated. She said Student told her in January 1852 that she had manipulated Miss Wilder. She said since this happened, she has changed significantly on how she interacts with students. She is more reserved and more aware of her actions. She said she tries to not care as much and that caring too much was her downfall. She says she works on not getting attached to her students and is more cautious in her interactions. Miss Wilder asked UPPAC and the Board to give her a second chance and allow her to continue teaching.

RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE

Under the Utah Educator Standards, an educator may not participate in sexual, physical, or emotional harassment towards any public school-age student. An educator may not engage in a single egregious instance or pattern of inappropriate contact in any communication, including written, verbal, or electronic, with a minor or student, or a single egregious instance or pattern of boundary violations with a student. An educator may not give an inappropriate gift to a student. An educator shall maintain a professional educator/student relationship by maintaining appropriate verbal, emotional and social boundaries. An educator shall take appropriate steps to notify a student's parents and refer a student to appropriate prevention services if a student threatens suicide or self-harm as required by Subsections 53E-9-203(7) and 53G-9-604(2).

Under the UPPAC presumptions, a suspension of three years or more is presumed appropriate if an educator engages in a boundary violation that is sexual in nature that is not sexually explicit conduct. A suspension of one to three years is presumed appropriate if an educator engages in a

pattern of boundary violations with a student under a circumstance not described in subsections (4)(a). A reprimand is presumed appropriate if an educator engages in conduct described in Subsection (8) that is more egregious or repetitive than the conduct described in Subsection (8). A letter of warning is presumed appropriate if an educator engages in a miscellaneous minimal boundary violation with a student or minor, whether physical, electronic, or verbal; or engages in minimal inappropriate physical contact with a student; or engages in unprofessional communications or conduct with a student.

UPPAC shall consider reducing a presumed suspension if the evidence shows that UPPAC's investigation into a matter with no pending criminal charges took more than six months to present to UPPAC under Subsection R277-211-3(3)(e) due to circumstances beyond the educator's control. R277-215-4(1)(b).

Aggravating Factors:

- "the educator's misconduct directly involved a student," Rule R277-215-3(2)(c).
- "the educator's misconduct resulted in physical or psychological harm to a student," Rule R277-215-3(2)(e).
- "the educator violated multiple standards of professional conduct," Rule R277-215-3(2)(f).

Mitigating Factors:

- "the educator has little or no prior disciplinary history," Rule R277-215-3(3)(e).

SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATIVE ACTIONS

Evidence Reviewed

- District documents
- Educator's resignation
- Screenshots of Instagram posts and messages

Interviews

- Isaiah Edwards, WCJH Principal
- Etta Plum, WCJH Assistant Principal
- Adam Kendall, Walnut Grove School Principal
- Alice Garvey, Walnut Grove School Director
- Eliza Jane Wilder, Educator