

CITY OF NEW YORK
THE SPECIAL COMMISSIONER OF INVESTIGATION
FOR THE NEW YORK CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

April 3, 2024

Hon. David C. Banks
Chancellor
New York City Public Schools
Department of Education
52 Chambers Street, Room 314
New York, NY 10007

Re: Thairich Escotto
SCI Case #: 2023-1153

Dear Chancellor Banks:

An investigation conducted by this office has substantiated that 21-year-old New York City Department of Education (“DOE”) substitute Paraprofessional Thairich Escotto (“Escotto”), assigned to Riverdale/Kingsbridge Academy (“RKA”) in the Bronx, mishandled a complaint and failed to report that a 16-year-old female student (“Student A”) was engaged in self-harm.¹ The investigation further uncovered that Escotto engaged in an inappropriate relationship with Student A.²

I. Investigation and Findings:

The investigation began on February 1, 2023, when the office of the Special Commissioner of Investigation for the New York City School District (“SCI”) received an online complaint of misconduct against Escotto from [REDACTED]. In her complaint, [REDACTED] stated that on January 31st, at approximately 10:30 a.m., Student A disclosed to Escotto that she had been “cutting” herself and had done so a week prior because she was “feeling stressed.” According to [REDACTED] Escotto did not report this information to a counselor until February 1st at 8:00 a.m. That same day, Student A’s mother (“Mother A”) complained to [REDACTED] that she felt that her daughter was involved in an inappropriate friendship/relationship with Escotto. Mother A explained

¹ On February 1st, Escotto was placed on the “Do Not Use List.” She has a problem code associated with her personnel file.

² Student A’s age listed herein was as of the date the investigation commenced.

that Student A and Escotto were Instagram friends, they called and texted one another over FaceTime, and Student A referred to Escotto as her “big sister.” Mother A further reported that on the evening of January 31st, Student A revealed to her that she had been “cutting” herself, and that she had told Escotto as well. Mother A added that she was upset that Escotto had not immediately notified anyone at the school about the matter.

SCI investigators met with ██████████ who stated that Escotto had been employed at RKA since 2021, and she was assigned to assist the middle school students that school year. ██████████ continued that during the 2022 school year, Escotto was placed with the high school students. ██████████ noted that Student A was not one of the students Escotto was designated to work with in either 2021 or 2022.

██████████ stated that on February 1st, ██████████ notified her that she had been contacted by Mother A who reported that her daughter had been cutting herself and had disclosed this information to Escotto on January 25th through text messages and photographs. Escotto, however, failed to follow protocol and did not report the matter until February 1st.³ According to ██████████ on February 1st, Escotto approached ██████████ and disclosed that Student A had been self-harming.⁴ ██████████ provided the text messages and screenshots Student A had sent to Escotto on January 25th.⁵

In an interview with SCI investigators, Mother A said that on January 31st, while speaking with her daughter on the phone, she learned that Student A had been cutting herself. Mother A said that Student A complained that she had not been feeling well and wanted to leave school and go home. Mother A continued that Student A disclosed that she cut herself because life was stressful, and that she suffered from depression and wanted to speak with a psychiatrist. Mother A stated that Student A was currently undergoing counseling at RKA, however, Mother A thought it might be best to seek counseling elsewhere.

Mother A continued that later that evening while at home, Mother A observed superficial cuts to Student A’s left inner arm. According to Mother A, Student A used disposable shaving blades to cut herself. Mother A added that Student A revealed that on January 31st, she had told Escotto about her depression and that she had inflicted injury upon herself. Mother A stated that she was upset that no school administrator had informed her that Student A had previously reported to a staff member that she had been engaging in self-harm. When Mother A examined Student A’s cell phone, she read text messages

³ After becoming aware of the situation involving Escotto, ██████████ verbally notified Escotto that her services at the school were no longer required. ██████████ then notified Sub Central and submitted a “Do Not Use Form,” to ensure that Escotto was excluded from assignments at the school.

⁴ SCI investigators met with ██████████ who acknowledged that Escotto told her that Student A had been “cutting herself,” that Escotto had not reported it, and instead sought advice from ██████████ on how to proceed. ██████████ stated that she instructed Escotto to speak with ██████████.

⁵ In their text message exchange, Escotto asked Student A to send a picture and then stated, “you didn’t cut too deep they’re superficial.” Escotto also asked Student A whether she “disinfect[ed] them.”

between her daughter and Escotto wherein Student A revealed that she had been cutting herself.⁶ The following day, on February 1st, Mother A contacted ██████████ and informed her that Escotto – a mandated reporter – failed to make the appropriate notifications that her daughter was at a potential “risk for suicide.” Mother A said Miller informed her that Escotto was no longer employed at the school.

Mother A told investigators that Student A and Escotto had recently become very friendly and as such, her daughter had drifted apart from her longtime friends. Mother A said that Student A and Escotto frequently communicated at “all hours of the day and night,” on the phone, through text messaging, and on FaceTime. Mother A said that Escotto was 21 years old, and she did not understand why an adult of that age would spend so much time “talking to and face timing” with a 16-year-old child. Mother A added that when she questioned Student A about her relationship with Escotto, Student A became upset and exclaimed, “you don’t understand.” Mother A added that based upon the text exchanges between Escotto and Student A, she did not believe they were involved in a sexual relationship.

In an interview with SCI investigators, Student A said that she met Escotto in September 2022, during a class when Escotto was assigned to another student. Student A recounted that she and Escotto spoke frequently in the classroom and described her as a “big sister.” Student A said that she had “a lot going on emotionally and mentally,” and she confided in Escotto because she felt she “understood.” Student A told investigators that she began cutting herself after taking a social studies test that she believed she failed, and because she had issues with two students who were upset with her because she no longer wanted to maintain the friendship. Student A said that the first time she cut herself was around January 25th. Student A explained that she used a barber’s razor to cut her left arm four times and she confided in Escotto through text messages and photographs. Student A said that she told Escotto because she felt that she was “talking to a friend.” Student A was insistent that she requested Escotto not report their conversation to anyone at school or to her mother.

Student A continued that, days after an argument with Mother A, she cut herself again. Student A said that, using a barber’s razor, she cut herself four more times on her left arm. Student A said that when she told her mother about her actions, Mother A became angry and took her phone. According to Student A, Mother A discovered that Student A had previously told Escotto via text messages that she had cut herself. However, Escotto did not report the matter to school officials because no one from the school had informed Mother A about the situation. Student A said that Mother A then contacted ██████████. Student A said that Escotto told her that she planned to report that Student A had been cutting herself on February 1st. Student A added that she did not want anything to happen to Escotto and that she never saw her outside of school premises, and that their relationship was “nothing more than little sister, big sister.”

In an interview with SCI investigators, Escotto said that she worked as a sub-paraprofessional at the school since February 2022, and that she met Student A while assigned to assist another student in Student A’s classroom. Escotto stated that she and Student A discussed issues that Student A had with her family. Escotto explained that she also had “family issues” growing up and that she and Student A

⁶ As noted previously, text messages indicated that Student A had informed Escotto about her harmful behavior on January 25th.

bonded over their similar experiences. Escotto said that she encouraged Student A to utilize different coping mechanisms to address the problems that affected her.

Escotto continued that in 2022, she had Covid and consequently was absent from work for several weeks. During that time, Escotto received a phone call from Student A which she thought was strange because Escotto had never given Student A her phone number. According to Escotto, Student A contacted her to discuss “some issues,” and to see how she was feeling. Escotto said that she and Student A continued to communicate regularly – by phone, text messaging, and FaceTime – and they developed a “big sister, little sister bond.”

Escotto acknowledged that Student A disclosed to her that she was having issues and that she had four superficial cuts on her arm. Escotto said that she counseled Student A by telling her that she had a lot to live for and there were other ways to cope with hardship. Escotto maintained that Student A insisted that she was not going to further harm herself and she “swore [Escotto] to secrecy.” Escotto admitted that she agreed to keep Student A’s secret.

Several days later – on a Saturday – Student A sent Escotto pictures with additional cuts to her arm. Escotto said that Student A stated that she had another issue with her mother which triggered her to cut herself again. Escotto told investigators that she then realized that she would have to report Student A’s self-harming to school officials, and the following Monday when she arrived at RKA, she reported the matter to Byrd. Escotto acknowledged that she knew she was a mandated reporter, however, the training she received left her with the impression that she was obligated to report cases of physical or sexual abuse by parents or others. Escotto added that if she “had to do it all over again,” she would have reported the matter involving Student A to school officials immediately.

The assigned SCI investigator obtained the phone records of Student A for the period from September 2022 through February 2023. Upon review, the assigned investigator found over 20 outgoing and incoming calls from Escotto to Student A. These communications were in addition to the text message exchanges between them that were provided by Mother A.

II. Conclusion and Recommendations:

SCI substantiated that Thairich Escotto mishandled a complaint that Student A was engaging in self-harm and as such, she failed to follow mandatory reporting protocols. As evidenced by the facts, Escotto’s inappropriate relationship with Student A clearly clouded her judgment and responsibility as a mandated reporter. When interviewed, Escotto admitted communicating with Student A by phone, text messaging, and FaceTime. It is therefore the recommendation of this office that the DOE take strong disciplinary action against Thairich Escotto, and she be advised that any failure to report in the future may lead to termination.

In addition, SCI offers the following Policy and Procedure Recommendation (“PPR”):

1. The DOE social media policy should be amended so that all DOE personnel or employees of its vendors are prohibited from contacting students using personal cell phone numbers, personal social media accounts, and other associated applications.⁷

Please respond in writing within 30 days of receipt of this letter as to what, if any, action has been taken or is contemplated regarding Thairich Escotto or the recommendations made herein. We are forwarding a copy of this letter to the Office of Legal Services.

Should you have any inquiries regarding the above, please Special Counsel Valerie A. Batista, the attorney assigned to the case. She can be reached at (212) 510-1417 or vbatista@nycsci.org. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

ANASTASIA COLEMAN
Special Commissioner of Investigation
for the New York City School District

By: /s/ Daniel I. Schlachet
Daniel I. Schlachet
First Deputy Commissioner

AC:DS:VB:lr

cc: Elizabeth Vladeck, Esq.
Karen Antoine, Esq.
Katherine Rodi, Esq.
Monica Davis-Thorne - Director

⁷ SCI has made similar recommendations to the DOE on numerous occasions.