

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND
AND
PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS

COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

 CAROLYN PELZMAN *
 v. *
 R.I. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION *

DECISION

Held: The interpretation of the Certification Office that service as an elementary school librarian does not equate to service as a general elementary school classroom teacher is sustained.

DATE: December 2, 1997

In June of 1996 the Certification Office of the Rhode Island Department of Education received a request from Ms. Carolyn Pelzman for a life professional certificate in elementary education. To obtain such a certification a teacher must demonstrate inter alia, “six (6) years of teaching experience at the elementary level, of which three (3) years must be in Rhode Island”. All parties agree that Ms. Pelzman has the required course work, degrees, and the years of teaching experience at the elementary level needed to qualify for life certification. The problem in this case is that Ms. Pelzman’s experience in the elementary schools was obtained in her capacity as an elementary school librarian. Ms. Pelzman possesses life certification as a school librarian and she has served as an elementary school librarian in Johnston.

The Office of Certification contends that Ms. Pelzman’s service as an elementary school librarian cannot count towards the “six (6) years of teaching experience at the elementary level” required for life certification as an elementary school teacher. The Department states that the intent of the regulation was to require actual elementary school classroom teaching under an elementary school certificate. Ms. Pelzman responds that the literal language of the regulation seems to impose no such requirement. She argues that the only requirement of the regulation seems to be six (6) years of classroom teaching at the elementary school level. She asserts that she has been teaching for six (6) years at the elementary level as a school librarian and, in addition, that service as a librarian at the elementary level very closely approximates class-room service.

The Certification Office points out that the librarian certification is one of nine “special subject certifications”. These subjects are Dance, Art, Health, Physical Education, Health and Physical Education, Home Economics, Technology Education,

Music, and Theatre. All of these subjects can be taught at the elementary school level. Still, as we understand the Certification Office, none of these specialized teaching areas provide the experiential base needed for general life certification as elementary school teacher. By way of analogy, six years experience in neurology might qualify a physician for board certification in neurology. But such specialized experience might well not count to the experience required for certification as a general family practitioner. Ms. Pelzman argues, however, that in fact as a library/media teacher she functions much as does an elementary teacher in a regular classroom.

We have no doubt that by their very nature all the other special teaching certificates provide specialized experience which is not entirely congruent with the broad general experience provided by service as a full time elementary school teacher. A regular elementary school teacher observes a single group of students for an entire day as these students learn different skills. A teacher teaching under a special certificate may observe more students during the course of the day but this observation is for a shorter period of time with regard to each individual student and is made only in the context of teaching one special area. We concur that, of all the special area teaching certificates issued by the Department of Education, the library/media certificate is the one that comes closest to providing experience in the “general practice” of teaching. But still we think that there is a substantial difference between experience as a library/media teacher and experience as general elementary school teacher. We therefore conclude that the interpretation of the Certification Office that experience as a library/media teacher does not “count” as service towards an elementary teaching certification has a valid basis. While the certification standards on this point could be more clearly drafted, we find that

the Department construction of these standards constitutes a valid interpretive regulation.

Lerner v. Gill, 463 A.2d 1352 (R.I.).

Conclusion

The petition must be denied.

Forrest L. Avila, Hearing Officer

Approved:

Peter McWalters, Commissioner

DATE: December 2, 1997