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### Former teacher pleads guilty in teen sex case

By PATRICK McARDLE STAFF WRITER

MANCHESTER – A former educator at the Bromley Brook School pleaded guilty on Wednesday to having sexual contact with a 16-year-old student at the school on three occasions between Sept. 1 and Oct. 14.

Stephen F. Peters, 40, of Woodford, pleaded guilty in Bennington District Court to three misdemeanor charges of sexual exploitation of a minor. The state dismissed a felony charge of lewd and lascivious conduct with a child that had been brought in December.

Bennington County State's Attorney Christina Rainville said the state had dismissed the charge because her office's investigators believed that while the student was credible, the incident did not constitute a criminal act. The lewd and lascivious conduct charge involved a different student who was 12 when she spoke to police.

Under a plea agreement, Peters is expected to serve six to 12 months in prison on each count with the sentences to be served consecutively, but the prison time will be suspended. Instead, Peters is expected to serve five years on probation under sex offender conditions and undergo sex offender treatment.

However, under Vermont law, a defendant cannot be sentenced for crimes such as those to which Peters pleaded guilty until the Vermont Department of Corrections completes a pre-sentence investigation. Judge David Suntag ordered the investigation on Wednesday.

According to a police affidavit filed in the case, Peters had a consensual sexual relationship with a student at Bromley Brook School

Rainville said the student's family "strongly supported" the plea agreement. Neither the student nor her family were at the hearing, although they were invited, because they are not local and the student no longer attends Bromley Brook, Rainville said.

The charges to which Peters entered guilty pleas require that the person with whom the defendant has sexual conduct be a minor; the defendant be at least four years older than the minor; and the defendant be in a position of supervision over the minor; in this case, because Peters was responsible for organized recreational activities that involved the minor.

Peters could have been sentenced to up to a year in prison for each charge.

Police said they had investigated Peters after Bromley Brook School officials contacted the Vermont Department of Children and Families in October.

According to police, another student, who was the 16-year-old student's roommate, told police that Peters told her he "loved (the 16-year-old student) and wanted to marry her."

The 16-year-old also confirmed she had a sexual relationship with Peters, according to

police.

Bromley Brook officials confirmed in December that Peters was no longer an employee of the school. In a statement that did not name Peters specifically, school officials said employees undergo background checks before they are hired but Peters' record was "clean."

According to the school's Web site, Bromley Brook is a residential boarding school for girls between the ages of 14 and 17 "who have difficulty finding success in a traditional school setting."

patrick.mcardle@rutlandherald.com

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