



MARYLAND OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR EDUCATION



Investigative Report Summary

OIGE Case 20-0002-I

Issued: April 20, 2021



MARYLAND OFFICE OF THE
INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR EDUCATION
Richard P. Henry, Inspector General



April 20, 2021

To the Citizens of Maryland and Baltimore County,

The Maryland Office of the Inspector General for Education (OIGE) plays an important role in safeguarding State funds provided to local school systems. Our primary mission is to prevent and detect fraud, waste and abuse, and educational mismanagement within the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), the Interagency Commission of School Construction (IAC) and the twenty-four (24) local school systems throughout the State of Maryland.

Background

The OIGE began an investigation based on a complaint received from the former Office of Education Accountability (OEA) alleging a cover-up by members of the Baltimore County Public School system concerning a convicted student sex offender attending Parkville High School. The complaint further alleged members of the Baltimore County Public School (BCPS) system falsified documents to cover-up the reason why the student sex offender was allowed back on school property.

Investigation

The OIGE conducted interviews with members of the Baltimore County Police Department, Parkville High Schools teachers and educational program managers, BCPS School Safety personnel, Parkville High School administrative and leadership staff, and members of the BCPS – Law Office.

Principal Astarita stated that prior to the COVID pandemic, the only circumstance that would allow for a student to be educated at home, would be for a medical issue (referred to as the Home and Hospital Program). Astarita said there were no BCPS provisions for students to be educated at home, due to a disciplinary issue such as being charged or convicted of a criminal offense.

In this case, ST 1 ended the 2017-2018 school year two (2) credits shy of being able to graduate. ST 1 needed to complete a science class and a “technical education” class to graduate from

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Parkville. As a result of the incomplete classwork, ST 1 was automatically unenrolled by BCPS for the 2018-2019 school year. BCPS protocols would have required ST 1 to re-enroll for the 2018-2019 school year.

At the time of this allegation, ST 1 would have been required to complete the “technical education” credit on school grounds / in-person. An evening program at an alternative school could have been used as a separate option, but this was not offered by BCPS. Following virtual learning curriculum changes due to the COVID pandemic, BCPS now offers alternatives for students to complete this requirement.

Conclusion

The OIGE review of emails confirmed that Astarita sought input and approval from the BCPS - Law Office. Specifically, on September 12, 2018, BCPS Attorney Valerie Thompson sent an email to Astarita that stated “Maureen – the letter is fine to send¹”, referring the Limited Authorization letter.

The OIGE also determined that a member of the BCPS School Safety Office had received several communications prior to and emails on September 12, 2018, which included the “Limited Authorization” letter drafted by Astarita. The email was in response to Astarita questioning who should have been cc’d on the “Limited Authorization” letter.

Furthermore, the OIGE investigation did conclude that a second “Limited Authorization” letter was not issued for the 2019-2020 school year. ST 1 was not approved to return to Parkville for the 2019-2020 school year. Internal controls within the BCPS did not prompt a re-issuance of the letter and ST 1 was not required to re-enroll.

The OIGE investigation found that Parkville High School Principal Astarita issued the “Limited Authorization” letter within guidelines set forth by the BCPS and Maryland Law. There is no indication that Astarita acted in an unethical or illegal manner.

In an effort to address concerns raised due to this case, Senate Bill 515 “Criminal Procedure – Registered Sex Offenders – Entry Onto School Property²” was introduced in the Maryland General Assembly on January 22, 2021. The bill proposed “repealing a certain exception authorizing, under circumstances, a student who is a registered sex offender from enter onto real property used for public or nonpublic elementary or secondary education schools”.

This legislation is applicable to sex offenders charged and convicted as an adult and does not address those students convicted as a juvenile. Educational executives (i.e., Superintendents,

¹ Valerie Thompson email to Maureen Astarita, September 12, 2018, Letter for student offender

² <http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgaweb/legislation/details/sb0515>

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Principals) do not have the ability to account for students who have been convicted as a juvenile sex offender and attends a public or nonpublic school in Maryland. This also applies to those students who have been convicted as a juvenile for a sexual related offense and transferred into a respective school system from another Maryland school system or out-of-state.

The OIGE understands information may be changed or updated after an investigation has been completed. The OIGE appreciates the cooperation provided by members of the Baltimore County Police Department, educational staff at Parkville High School, the Baltimore County Public School's School Safety and Law Office's in this investigation.

Respectfully,



Richard P. Henry
Inspector General

Cc: Hon. Makeda Scott, Chair - Baltimore County Board of Education
Honorable Members of the Baltimore County Board of Education
Dr. Darryl L. Williams, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools
Ms. Margaret-Ann Howie, Esq., Baltimore County Public Schools General Counsel
Cpl. Shawn Vinson, Esq., Baltimore County Police Department
Ms. Kelly Madigan, Esq., Inspector General, Baltimore County

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