



Mailed 1/30/17/RW

Karen B. Salmon, Ph.D.
State Superintendent of Schools

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January 30, 2017

Mr. Patrick Rooney
Deputy Director
Office of State Support
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Mr. Rooney:

This letter is in reference to a hotline complaint received by your office regarding allegations against Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS). In a letter received in early July, you indicated to State Superintendent Dr. Karen Salmon, that you were in receipt of a complaint alleging the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of PGCPS had forced educators to change the grades of ninth and twelfth grade students in order to boost promotion and graduation rates.

You provided Dr. Salmon with a copy of the complaint and asked that she investigate the allegation and let USDE know what was found, the actions that were taken, and the pending or finalized outcome of the investigation. The complaint regarding PGCPS was not signed and it was not possible to talk with the individual who had made it. I believe it would have been helpful to clarify that person's concerns or get more information that was specific to the situations noted. It was also not possible to get back to that individual to communicate findings.

Following receipt of your letter, Dr. Salmon did contact the PGCPS CEO, Dr. Kevin Maxwell, to make him aware of the allegation and to gather information from him regarding those allegations. Dr. Maxwell shared with Dr. Salmon the focus he had set when he became CEO of PGCPS in 2012. His goal was to improve academic achievement, reduce the dropout rate and improve the graduation rate. His initiatives were focused on keeping students in school and actively engaged in learning. He would have expected the rate would have increased in his schools and he was pleased it was doing so. He was adamant that no one had been forced to change any grades nor adjust anything on student transcripts. He did note that the grading policy had been revised recently and that not all people were supportive of it. He thought perhaps that and some of the initiatives targeted at keeping students in school could have driven the individual to write. Since the letter was anonymous and the PGCPS CEO had adequately addressed the State Superintendent's concerns, nothing further was done.

In December a staff person in our Department received a call from your office asking the status of the investigation. Our principle attorney advised that we do a more formal investigation of the complaint and put something in writing to your office. The State Superintendent asked that I handle the investigation of the incident. As the new Chief Academic Officer, I had no previous knowledge of the discussion with the PGCPS CEO and I reached out to him in early December and requested to meet with him. I explained that I would be investigating the complaint against him regarding changing grades to

improve promotion and graduation rates. It was agreed that he would come to my office on December 12, 2016. Prior to him coming I looked at the graduation data for his county for the past five years and for the two high schools mentioned in the letter. My conversation with Dr. Maxwell focused on why his data was improving, although slowly. When we met, he described the lack of supports for students when he had assumed the CEO position in PGCPs in 2012. He was dismayed with the lack of understanding staff had regarding cohorts and how supports had to start as students entered high school – or before – if graduation rates were to increase. He described the credit recovery system his team set up for students, the ninth grade initiative they put in place, and the system-wide training done using Data Wise. He also noted the change in the grading policy and how teachers and parents had been involved in its revision. Although all stakeholder groups were involved in changing that policy, he said that not everyone was happy with the new philosophy and procedures. He also said he knew of no specific reason the two individual schools had been mentioned. At the conclusion of our meeting I asked him to identify others with whom I could talk. I asked to talk with the principals' supervisors for the two high schools, with someone involved in grade collection on transcripts, with someone responsible for school counselors, etc. Because of the fast-approaching holidays we set up interview times to occur in early January.

On January 9, 2017, I traveled to PGCPs and spent several hours interviewing five individuals. I spent 30 to 45 minutes each with an Instructional Director, a Data Management and Strategy Analyst, a Special Project Officer, a Deputy Superintendent, and the Chief Executive Officer. The same information was asked of each individual and discussions were thorough. Each individual was asked the following basic questions as well as many others that resulted from their responses:

1. What process is used for grading students? Who is responsible for putting grades on report cards? Are grades ever changed? Under what circumstances can that occur? Has there ever been pressure from a supervisor or from the superintendent about changing a grade or not giving a particular grade? Have you heard of any concerns coming from either of these high schools? From any other schools?
2. Has the message ever been sent from the CEO that no ninth grader or senior can fail? Do you think students should be allowed to fail? Why or why not?
3. Do schools provide work packets or allow for online learning? If yes, under what conditions? If yes, has it helped? Have you seen any problems arise due to the use of work packets? If so, please describe them.
4. Describe the credit recovery program. Has it been well-accepted? Is it worthwhile? Is online learning a valuable tool? If so, how? How do you see it being used?
5. Was training provided on the new grading system? Are there supports available to staff?
6. Has your school had an increase in graduation/promotion rates? To what do you attribute those increases?

Each of the persons with whom I spoke was very proud of the work being done in the school system. They felt they had good direction under this superintendent and that from the day he had come in the school system he had said they were going to focus on improving graduation rates and keeping students in school.

Several of the individuals focused much of their discussion on the credit recovery program and how successful it was. There was also corroboration among those interviewed that work packets had helped

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many students keep their grades up. The packets had been revised several years ago and were aligned with the instructional program. They were also consistent across all schools. Prior to the last several years there was inconsistency in how they were utilized.

According to several of the individuals interviewed, there had been much training about cohorts and how graduation rates were computed. There was a data system established to track students' grades and to provide teachers and schools with up-to-date information about students' performance. They have established an Early Warning System so schools can intervene early when students are beginning to have trouble.

None of the individuals recalled any situations for which there had been complaints that grades had been changed nor had they ever heard Dr. Maxwell indicate that anyone had to change grades. There was some discussion of the new reporting system and the fact that not every teacher was in support of some of the requirements of that revised system.

Following approximately two and one-half hours of discussion, I again spoke with Dr. Maxwell. I shared what his staff had said and looked at his data for his county and for the two high schools. He noted how pleased he was with the growth his students were making and discussed several of the programs he felt had led to that improvement.

After reflecting on the data, the concerns in the letter, the responses of the individuals I interviewed and the conversation with the CEO, it is my belief that there was not anything done to indicate grades had been manipulated nor that bullying had been used to ensure more students were being promoted or graduated.

If you require further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me at carol.williamson@maryland.gov or by phone at (410) 767-3646. I will be happy to assist you.

Respectfully,

Carol A. Williamson, Ed.D.
Chief Academic Officer
Office of the Deputy for Teaching and Learning



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

MAR 15 2017

The Honorable Karen B. Salmon
Superintendent of Education
Maryland Department of Education
200 West Baltimore Street
Baltimore, MD 21201

Dear Superintendent Salmon:

This letter is to acknowledge receipt of the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) response dated January 30, 2017, provided to the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) regarding a hotline complaint (#16-2015451) involving Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS). The anonymous complainant alleged that the Chief Executive Officer of PGCPS forced educators to change the grades of ninth and twelfth grade students in the local educational agency order to boost promotion and graduation rates.

The Department's Office of State Support (OSS) referred this matter to MSDE for investigation and requested a response. MSDE provided a response that addressed the actions taken by the State educational agency to investigate allegations in the complaint. OSS has determined that MSDE's response is satisfactory and considers this matter closed.

We appreciate your assistance and cooperation with investigating the complaint received by the Department's Office of Inspector General Hotline Division. The actions taken by MSDE to work with PGCPS attests to the dedication and responsiveness of MSDE's commitment to Maryland's students and following Federal laws.

Thank you for your commitment and continued focus on enhancing education for all of Maryland's students. If you have questions regarding this matter, please contact Ashley Briggs and Tiffany Forrester of my staff at: OSS.Maryland@ed.gov.

Sincerely,

Patrick Rooney
Deputy Director
Office of State Support

cc: Carol Williamson, Chief Academic Officer

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