
INTERNAL MEMORANDUM

TO: Henderson Lewis, Jr., Ph.D., Superintendent

FROM: Dr. Kelli Peterson,
Chief Portfolio Innovation & Accountability Officer

DATE: September 25, 2019

RE: New Beginnings Schools Foundation Investigation Report

Issue:

On February 28, 2019 the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) received written notification from Dr. Runell King, former Director of Data, Assessment & Accountability at John F. Kennedy at Lake Area High School (JFK), alleging multiple wrongdoings by New Beginnings Schools Foundation: grade changing scheme, mishandling of an investigation, mishandling of a grievance, and employee retaliation.

Investigation:

To assess the allegations asserted by Dr. King, the OPSB administration reviewed additional documentation provided by Dr. King and New Beginnings School Foundation Former CEO, Michelle Blouin-Williams and Human Resources Director, Michael Washington. These documents, along with all documents reviewed, are included as an addendum to this report.

On March 7, 2019 Gayla Mair, Director of School Performance, and Dr. Kelli Peterson, Senior Equity and Accountability Officer conducted a meeting with Dr. Runell King following up on a letter that he sent to OPSB Administration via email alleging grade changes at John F. Kennedy at Lake Area High School had occurred. On March 12, 2019, OPSB leadership (Dr. Peterson and Ulyses Collins) met with NBSF leadership, who shared additional documentation to support their claim that grade changes

were due to an error in PowerSchool related to the weighting scale. The additional documentation included screenshots from PowerSchool and the gradebook for the teacher in question. On March 15, 2019, Dr. King forwarded an email from Dr. Love to Dr. Peterson which stated, “For the record, I was never told that there was an investigation. I certainly wanted to know the urgency, all of a sudden about a roll book.” Dr. Love was employed as the Algebra III teacher for John F. Kennedy at Lake Area High School. On March 25, 2019, Dr. Peterson spoke with Michelle Blouin-Williams and asked her about the quote in The Lens article regarding Dr. Love’s statement that her grade book was inaccurate. She stated that she would have Mr. Washington forward the emails between him and Dr. Love, which were sent that evening.

The email thread that was provided begins with communication on March 15, 2019, two days after the OPSB had concluded the initial fact finding. The March 15th email from Dr. Love to Mr. Williams [sic] states “The roll book has problems and is not accurate.” Additionally, she includes a specific student that she questions the final grade designation. In a series of emails forwarded on March 19th, Dr. Love reiterates the inaccurate grades, and also includes that students with “too many unexcused absentees” should have an “F.”

On March 26, 2019, Ulysses Collins and Dr. Peterson called Michelle Blouin-Williams to ask questions regarding the email thread and allegations from Dr. Love’s emails and requested a statement regarding the additional allegations made by Dr. Love, as well as an update as to where NBSF was with its internal investigation. A response via email was provided on March 26th by Michelle Blouin-Williams. On March 27, 2019, Dr. Peterson called Dr. Love on both her home and cell phone number and left voicemail messages, as well as sending an email to request a meeting regarding the grade change allegations.

On March 28, 2019 and as a follow up to OPSB’s investigation into the allegations, Ulysses Collins and Dr. Peterson called Dr. King to ask additional questions regarding PowerSchool password access and use. PowerSchool serves as the school’s student information data system, and OPSB wanted to verify the security of the data system. During this phone call, Dr. King stated that the last time that he was logged into PowerSchool was February 26th and that he had only one personal log-in to PowerSchool. However, he stated that Michelle Blouin-Williams asked him to make three additional log-ins for state reporting purposes for an NBSF employee, and two other individuals that he trained on completing this report. He stated that the NBSF employee created three generic accounts for this purpose, King 1, King 2, and King 3. Dr. King stated that he did not manage these accounts or their use.

Dr. King also stated that when Dr. Love left NBSF in January the only information that she recorded in her roll book was attendance, and not grades. However, the school reached out to her asking her to

complete her gradebook with the grades, at which time Dr. Love downloaded this information from PowerSchool and entered it into the gradebook as printed. However, after time passed, she realized that the grades she entered into the gradebook downloaded directly from PowerSchool were inaccurate, which prompted her emails to the school about this issue. Dr. King forwarded the signed grade verification forms from Dr. Love for Quarter 1.

Upon receiving additional information, including signed teacher grade verification forms for Quarter 1, Quarter 2 Stored Historical Data, PowerSchool Report, and Semester 1 Report Cards, for Dr. Love's Algebra class, a comparison of Quarter 1 grades and Quarter 2 grades was completed and analyzed. The analysis indicated that approximately 10 student quarter grades were changed from the signed verification forms from Quarter 1 to what was ultimately inputted into PowerSchool. The same analysis was unable to be conducted for Quarter 2 because the signed verification forms from Dr. Love were unable to be provided by NBSF and OPSB was unable to make contact with Dr. Love directly. The grades as delineated in the grade book correspond with the adjusted/modified grades as reported in PowerSchool, but after additional documentation was reviewed, OPSB was unable to verify the reason for the grade changes.

Second Alleged Grade Change Scheme

On May 24, 2019, it was revealed to OPSB by NBSF Board Chair that, upon the conclusion of the Adams & Reese investigation, additional grade changes occurred by several JFK staff members, including administrators. The OPSB sent written notification that it had come to its attention that there were possible grade changes involving the 2018-2019 graduating class of John F. Kennedy at Lake Area High School, and OPSB expanded the scope of its investigation to include a review of these additional allegations and any pertinent facts surrounding them.

On May 28, 2019, the OPSB sent written notification to the Louisiana Department of Education (Kunjan Narechania and Joan Hunt) that the OPSB had been informed of an additional group of grades that were altered for the current graduating seniors at JFK, which could have serious impact on the receipt of diplomas.

On June 6, 2019, the OPSB staff were present at John F. Kennedy to oversee the LDOE and NBSF's work to begin auditing senior student files to validate credits and graduation requirements. As a measure of increased oversight, OPSB continued and continues to have designated staff on site. On June 7, 2019, the OPSB sent written notification to NBSF Re: Notice of Non-Compliance, Level 2 due to the lack of compliance as outlined with its contractual obligations. On June 25, 2019, the OPSB sent a written update to NBSF Re: Notice of Non-Compliance, Level 2 including additional required action steps. Additionally, this was the first day for summer school at John F. Kennedy for the impacted senior students.

Conclusion:

While the initial investigation of grade change allegations reported as part of the first grade change scheme was inconclusive, a second grade change scheme was reported to OPSB on May 24, 2019 which resulted in the graduating class of 2018-2019 not being certified. As a result of this second act, graduating seniors were not able to receive diplomas and transcripts in a timely manner, some students were required to take additional courses over the summer, and some students were also required to take end of the course exams during the summer all, in an effort to properly certify graduates. In order to ensure students received proper notification of their status and were given an opportunity to rectify things before the start of the next school year, investigation efforts were shifted to providing assistance with record verification, individual student prescriptions and on-site assistance at JFK to expedite the process.

Due to the welfare of students being at risk, OPSB made the decision to seek revocation of NBSF's charter to operate JFK. On July 18, 2019 as this matter was still being reviewed, the New Beginnings School Foundation Charter Board unanimously voted to surrender their charters for both John F. Kennedy at Lake Area High School and Pierre A. Capdau Charter School at Avery Alexander effective at the end of the 2019-2020 school year. Additionally, NBSF has made several key changes in leadership, in response to OPSB requesting that NBSF share any changes to leadership or processes as a result of OPSB's investigation into the allegations and the open Notice of Non-Compliance, Level 2. As a result, NBSF hired a new CEO and made other changes to their leadership. Additionally, NBSF moved from GradPoint, the system that was in use during the 2018-2019 school year, and began using EdGenuity. These changes addressed some of the concerns OPSB expressed that gave rise to the initial Notice of Non-Compliance and the ultimate decision to seek revocation of NBSF's charter. However, in light of these changes and the voluntary surrender, OPSB is no longer seeking revocation.

Outstanding Issues:

Although this report summarizes the Orleans Parish School Board's efforts around its investigation and even though NBSF voted to surrender, there is still an open Notice of Non-Compliance, Level 2. During its investigation, OPSB was also made aware that the CEO for New Beginnings Schools Foundation allegedly altered minutes from a NBSF board meeting which led to a transportation contract being awarded that may not have gone through the appropriate approval process as required by NBSF. The following items are still outstanding as it pertains to the Notice of Non-Compliance:

1. NBSF must submit quarterly reports (due by the 30th of September, December, March, and June) to OPSB with the following information:

- Copies of minutes from any meetings of the NBSF Board of Directors;
 - Copies of any contracts issued;
 - Monthly financial reports for each month of the quarter; and
 - List of all payments issued that exceed \$10,000 with proper invoice or backup for such payments.
2. NBSF shall submit individualized plans for any senior student that does not successfully complete the graduation requirements during the summer session.
 3. A written report at the conclusion of their investigation that should summarize the details of the investigation, including documents reviewed and persons interviewed. This report should also discuss any conclusions reached and summarize any corrective action taken or planned by NBSF as a result of the investigation.

The Orleans Parish School Board will continue to work with New Beginnings Schools Foundation to bring the Non-Compliance to a close and resolve any outstanding requests through OPSB's Charter School Accountability Framework process.