

SIGNIFICANT ACTIVITY REPORT

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2017

**AN OIG INVESTIGATION REVEALED EXTENSIVE IMPROPER PRACTICES
AT SCHOOL SERVING DETAINEES IN THE COOK COUNTY JAIL**

The Office of Inspector General determined that a CPS high school serving detainees at the Cook County Jail falsely inflated its enrollment and attendance data and awarded course credits that were not earned. Through these practices, the school artificially inflated its School Quality Rating Policy scores. On June 30, 2017, the OIG issued a summary report (OIG 16-00276) to the Chicago Board of Education detailing its findings and recommendations in this matter. This marks the fifth consecutive year the OIG has reported on the falsification of student records in CPS schools.

Some key takeaways from this investigation are as follows:

- From the 2012–13 school year through the 2015–16 school year, 342 students were kept on the rolls improperly after their release from jail a total of 352 times. On average, those students were listed falsely as being enrolled at the school for 42 days following their release from jail. In 54 instances those students were kept on the rolls for more than 100 days after their release.
- The school also falsified attendance. During the 2015–16 school year alone, 45 students were reported falsely as being present for the full school day a total of 351 times after they were already released from the jail. The attendance of students still in the jail was inflated as well.
- The school frequently awarded students credits when the students had not received enough classroom instruction to qualify for them. One teacher told the OIG the school was a “credit mill.”

- One student was shot to death a week following his release from jail, and on the day he was killed the school was still reporting him on the rolls and present for classes even though the school knew he had been released. After he died, he was given a full course credit (for a semester's worth of a class) even though the principal had learned of his death and knew that he only had attended classes for a brief period of time prior to his release. The principal then pressured two of the student's teachers to issue him more credits, but the teachers refused because the student had not received enough classroom instruction. Indeed, the student's records show that he did not receive enough classroom instruction to receive a credit for any course, and according to reports from his teachers his instruction time was even less than what was eventually reported officially. Notably, although he had attended three classes for a short period of time, he never attended the course for which he was given credit.
- The school also employed a questionable blended-class structure whereby teachers were expected to teach multiple courses simultaneously to classrooms comprised of a collection of students enrolled in different courses. For example, students enrolled in chemistry had to share the teacher's time with students enrolled in biology and earth science. Particularly troubling was that teachers reported they often were unaware which subject each individual student was supposed to be learning.
- The school's 2016–17 SQRP scores show that its attendance rate was 92.5% and its credit-attainment rate was 85.4%, both of which were the second highest of any CPS school in its category. However, the OIG found that those scores were inflated due to falsified data.

BACKGROUND

The school at issue is an alternative high school located within the Cook County Jail. It is designed to afford an opportunity for the school-aged detainees in the jail to continue their high school education while they are detained. When the current principal took the helm at the school, she implemented changes to maximize the number of credits that students could potentially earn. One of the changes she implemented was a block-scheduling system with three, 100-minute class periods in a day. The long class periods allowed students to finish courses within condensed terms that were only seven weeks long. Under this system, the principal was able to fit six terms into a school year. Students could take up to three courses in a term and complete up to 18 courses in a year.

Within this unique setting, the school, under the principal's leadership, engaged in several improper practices discussed below that undermined its academic integrity.

IMPROPER POST-RELEASE ENROLLMENTS

The OIG discovered that a former student, who was killed one week after his release from the Cook County Jail, was still on the school's rolls and marked as attending class on the days following his release, including the date of his death. Given that he had left the school upon his release, he should not have been kept on the rolls and certainly should not have been marked as attending class. To make matters worse, after he died, the school issued him a credit for a course he was falsely recorded as taking after his release from the jail. Although he spent minimal amounts of time in three classes prior to his release, his records show that he did not receive enough classroom instruction to qualify for any credits. Moreover, the credit he was given was for a course he never attended. Worse still, the principal subsequently pressured two of the student's teachers to issue him more credits, but the teachers refused.

After learning about that incident, the OIG conducted a broad review of the school's data and discovered that the student discussed above was not an isolated case. To the contrary, the school consistently kept students enrolled, reported them as present for class and awarded them credits after they left the jail and could no longer be in attendance. From the 2012–13 school year through the 2015–16 school year, the OIG identified 352 enrollments involving 342 students that continued improperly past the date those students were released from the jail. Those post-release enrollments resulted in those 342 students being maintained on the rolls for a total of 14,664 days longer than they should have been. On average, the post-release enrollments lasted 42 days. In 54 instances they lasted longer than 100 days. Furthermore, the school issued credits to those students during those false enrollments 126 times.

The school also falsified attendance on a wide scale during those improper continuing enrollments. In the 2015–16 school year — the only year in question for which the OIG was able to obtain the full attendance data set — 45 students were recorded as present at school for the day 351 times after they had already been released from the jail. Because those daily-attendance entries reflect that the students were present for all their classes those days and the students can take up to three classes in a day, those 45 students were falsely reported as present for as many as 1,053 classes that year. Thus, on average, each of those students was falsely reported as being present for as many as 23 classes after leaving the school. Significantly, in terms of reporting students as earning their credit requirements, the impact of the falsification was twice as large because the school's class periods were 100 minutes long — twice the length of a typical CPS class. And given the short terms at the school, these periods of falsified attendance were the equivalent of students being marked present, on average, for 20% of a term after they already left school.

OTHER EXAMPLES OF IMPROPER ENROLLMENT, ATTENDANCE AND CREDIT PRACTICES

As stated above, the principal designed the school year to include six short terms to maximize the number of credits students could receive. As a result, the terms were so short — often 36 to 38 days — that they provided little margin of error for students to miss class or enroll late and still receive sufficient minutes of classroom instruction. The principal scheduled cutoff dates approximately seven days into a term that were supposed to serve as the last day in which students could enroll and still receive credit for the course. However, the principal did not always enforce the cutoff dates, and students regularly received credits without spending enough time in class. Even if the cutoff dates were followed, they would not ensure that students received 3,600 minutes of classroom instruction, as required to earn a credit according to CPS policy (Board Report 04-0128-PO1, § I(A)), because the classes were 100 minutes long and the terms shortened at the cutoff dates were fewer than 36 days.

Within these curtailed terms, where perfect attendance was critical, students nevertheless frequently missed class. At times, those students were reported by the school as present when their teachers had marked them absent. One student received a credit for a course, even though his teacher only marked him present for class seven times during the course of a seven-week term. Another student received a credit for a course after his teacher only marked him present 17 times in a seven-week term. According to teacher reports, many students received credits without having received enough classroom instruction due to 10-day stays in solitary confinement. One teacher reported that a student received a course credit simply for watching *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey*, a science-documentary series presented by Neil deGrasse Tyson.

Teachers at the school stated that the principal pressured them to issue credits over their objections when students had not spent sufficient time in the classroom. The principal denied pressuring teachers in such circumstances, but the evidence shows that, at the very least, she encouraged them to issue credits in those instances. Based on the totality of the evidence, the principal clearly established an environment at the school where teachers were expected to overcome their concerns about short enrollments and missed classroom instruction and find a way to distribute credits to students.

The OIG also found that the school enrolled numerous students beyond their 22nd birthdays in violation of CPS guidelines requiring that students be disenrolled before turning 22. Some of those students who were 22 years of age or older also received credits. Notably, a few students were as old as 27, 28 and 29 at the time they were enrolled. While those students did not receive credits, they were still enrolled in violation of CPS guidelines.

Additionally, the school often misreported student attendance, in part, because it relied on information from the Department of Corrections, rather than the teachers' record of observed attendance in the classroom. Based on the system in place at the school, each morning the DOC was supposed to inform the principal's administration if any of the students refused to attend class that day. If they did not refuse, the school clerk reported them as present for the entire day. Nevertheless, students sometimes skipped classes despite initially indicating that they would attend. In fact, the principal admitted that the school did not always report attendance accurately because students were reported as present for courses they missed later in the day so long as they appeared for their first class of the day.

QUESTIONABLE BLENDED-CLASS STRUCTURE

The school also employed a deficient and dishonest course structure in which students sitting within the same classroom took multiple different courses categorized within a general discipline. For example, science teachers taught chemistry, biology and earth science to the same class at the same time, and social studies teachers taught American history, economics, African-American studies and world studies to the same class at the same time. Moreover, teachers often did not know the courses the students were enrolled in until they issued the credits the students were supposed to receive at the end of the term. Thus, science teachers did not know which of their students were supposed to be learning chemistry and which ones were supposed to be learning biology. At times, students received credits for a subject that they were not taught at all. For example, some students received credits for learning Spanish after taking a class where the teacher taught only French.

This system is dishonest and sets a horrible example for students. It also harms students by depriving them of the opportunity to learn the courses in which they enrolled. Although they were given credits, they were not provided with the education that those credits were meant to represent.

INFLATED SQRP SCORES

As a result of the improper and dishonest practices discussed above, the principal artificially inflated the school's SQRP scores. As the principal told the OIG, she is evaluated, in part, based on those scores. The SQRP data reflects that the school is performing very well in comparison to the 47 other high schools that CPS classifies as "option schools" (the category for schools primarily serving students who re-enrolled after dropping out). The school's 2016-17 SQRP scores, which are based on 2015-16 data, show that its attendance rate was 92.5% and the credit-attainment rate was 85.4%. Both rates were the second highest of any option school. Its one-year graduation rate was 97.8%, which was one of the highest rates of any option school. Accordingly, CPS's accountability status for the school reflects that it is in good standing. Based on the practices discussed above, however, the OIG concluded that the school artificially inflated its scores by falsifying data.

The evidence suggests that, despite the favorable graduation, credit-attainment and attendance rates reported, actual student learning has been minimal. STAR assessments (standardized tests used by CPS in option schools) show that students at this school scored worse than any other option-school students in reading and math growth. The principal acknowledged her students' poor STAR scores, but blamed teachers for the low scores. Given that under the principal's policies, the students (1) are able to receive credit for classes they only attended for a couple weeks, and (2) attend blended classes where teachers cover multiple different courses at once without knowing which courses the students are supposed to be learning, the OIG concluded that the setting and framework likely prevented students from receiving an adequate education.

UNDERREPORTING OF DANGEROUS INCIDENTS

Additionally, many teachers complained that the principal discouraged them from reporting dangerous incidents at the school. According to the teachers, the concerning incidents at the school include: assaults; chronic classroom masturbation; students inebriated during class after drinking "hooch" that they made in their toilets; flooding and water damage caused by students clogging toilets with mattresses; and threatening conduct by an organized faction of students who committed sexual assaults in the jail. Although the teachers complained to the OIG about these ongoing problems, the principal never officially reported more than 10 incidents involving misconduct, injuries or safety concerns to CPS in a year. Most CPS high schools report far more such incidents in a year. Given the teacher complaints and the low level of official reporting, the OIG found that the school almost certainly underreported the number of dangerous incidents and safety concerns. CPS should be apprised of every incident that risks the safety of CPS students and teachers, and it also should be aware of disruptive classroom misconduct that makes educating exceedingly difficult.

OIG RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings discussed above, the OIG recommended that the Board terminate the principal's employment. The OIG stresses that it appreciates that this school has a unique mission and unique challenges. That being said, the school cannot falsify data and award credits that were not earned. It appears that the school's improper and fraudulent practices are a means of distributing as many credits as possible, with a heavy cost to academic integrity. To help remedy these problems and prevent such improper practices in the future, the OIG recommended that the Board implement the following policy changes:

The official attendance reported by the school should be based on teachers' records reflecting the students whom teachers actually observed attending their classes. To adopt this more accurate system of reporting attendance, the school will need to begin reporting *period*-attendance codes in addition to *daily*-attendance codes. The

school should also begin utilizing the half-day daily-attendance codes to report attendance accurately. For example, when students are present for only two of the three periods in the day, they should be reported as absent for half the day. (See CPS Guidelines for Attendance Improvement and Truancy Reduction, p. 154.)

The length of the school's terms should be extended beyond 40 days to ensure that students receive enough classroom instruction in the event they miss a few days of class. To accommodate longer terms, the school will probably need to decrease the total number of terms in a year to four or five.

The school should abandon its course structure of simultaneously teaching multiple different subjects within the same general discipline. Instead, it should adopt the traditional course structure employed in other CPS schools.

Finally, the school's administration should begin encouraging staff to report dangerous incidents and safety concerns, and all such incidents should be officially reported to CPS.