

**Summary Report on Grading Integrity Issues and Other Staff Misconduct Allegations at  
Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts**

*Baltimore City Public Schools, Department of Fair Practices  
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In August of 2019, Baltimore City Public Schools (“City Schools”) identified potential irregularities in the manner that Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts (“AFS”) was enrolling and graduating students. The concerns arose from a review of seniors’ records as part of City Schools’ protocols for monitoring compliance with graduation requirements. In response, City Schools initiated a data review that raised serious concerns about grading integrity, as well as the validity of student enrollment, attendance, and credit recovery programming. Based on this information, a formal investigation was launched in September 2019, by City Schools’ Staff Investigations Unit (“SIU”) in the Department of Fair Practices.

While the investigation was pending, City Schools took several steps to address potential root causes of the allegations:

- **August 2019** – City Schools staff noted grading concerns at AFS during summer graduation, and a small number of students were not allowed to graduate. Those students received individual action plans to provide a pathway to complete graduation requirements.
- **September 2019** – AFS’s principal and assistant principal were placed on administrative leave pending the results of the investigation. A managing assistant principal was identified for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year.
- **Spring 2020** – With central office support, AFS conducted a review of individual student transcripts, starting with seniors. Families received personalized communication – mailed letters and phone calls – with updates on student progress toward graduation. The letters were sent before summer school so that students could enroll in summer school if necessary. If City Schools identified concerns, staff offered parent conferences to discuss a timeline and plan for graduation.
- **Summer 2020** – City Schools appointed an experienced and transformational principal at AFS. Under this new leadership, AFS continues to review student transcripts and directly contact students’ parents with concerns.

The SIU investigation necessitated careful examination of a series of serious allegations, which required review of numerous documents, emails, and material from hundreds of student records from the 2016-2017 school year through the 2019-2020 school year, as well as analysis of information from City Schools’ student information systems. More than 30 staff were interviewed. Many of the interviews were conducted on multiple days over the course of multiple months. As required by law, City Schools ensured that the investigation was conducted fairly, with due process afforded to all staff involved and proper handling of several personnel matters that arose from the SIU investigation. **While City Schools cannot publicly disclose the specific disciplinary consequences due to state personnel laws, the SIU investigation substantiated findings of**

**inappropriate conduct by four staff members. Three are no longer employed by City Schools, and administrative proceedings are pending with respect to the fourth.**

During the past year, City Schools coordinated its ongoing investigation of AFS with the Maryland Office of the Inspector General for Education (“OIGE”) as part of City Schools’ response to OIGE’s October 2020 request for information regarding student grading review procedures from 2015 to the present, including but not limited to AFS. City Schools also consulted with OIGE to ensure that the public release of this investigative summary does not impact the efficacy of OIGE’s review, which remains ongoing. City Schools looks forward to any recommendations of additional opportunities for improvement that OIGE may offer after its review, in addition to the specific key findings, recommendations, and programmatic enhancements resulting from the SIU investigation and subsequent follow-up, as set forth in more detail below:

**Key Finding #1: School administrators at AFS improperly changed student grades and pressured teachers to provide students with grades they did not earn.**

Under state law and Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners (“Board”) Policy IKA, which governs grading and reporting, there are valid and legitimate reasons that grades may be changed after a teacher first records them. For example, a student may have completed make-up work that should be included; an assignment or assessment may have been omitted by accident; a student on long-term medical absence may complete work through an alternative program; or a mathematical error might need to be corrected. After they have first recorded a student’s grade and the grading window has closed, a teacher may only adjust a student’s grade when there are extenuating educational circumstances, with approval from the school principal and supporting documentation. Principals may adjust a student’s grade after conferring with the teacher that assigned the grade.

The SIU investigation determined that AFS administrators pressured teachers and staff to change students’ grades, especially for seniors. School administrators also pressured teachers to ask their fellow teachers to change grades. Teachers were instructed by school administrators to violate City Schools grading protocols by entering grades after the grading window had closed without proper authorization or documentation, and they were pressured to provide make-up work to students and create extra assignments, even if students did not attend class. Furthermore, school administrators asked teachers to recalculate student grades using make-up work that the students turned in late, curve students’ exam grades to make sure they passed, and allow students to take final exams after the exam period was over.

Overall, City Schools’ investigation documented at least 15 students who improperly received passing grades during the period from the 2016-2017 school year through the 2018-2019 school year, including some who may have earned credits necessary for graduation based on those improperly earned grades in violation of State of Maryland requirements. Since initially identifying grading concerns at AFS in the summer of 2019, City Schools and AFS staff addressed many concerns involving these and other students through engagement with students and families to create individualized pathways to graduation.

**Key Finding #2: AFS students were scheduled into classes that did not exist and/or that they did not attend, when they should have been withdrawn due to lack of attendance.**

The SIU investigation revealed that AFS students were scheduled into classes that did not exist (known at the school as “filler classes”), when they should have been withdrawn due to lack of attendance. For example, the investigation identified students who were enrolled in a yearbook class with a school administrator as the teacher of record, during the 2017-2018 school year through the 2019-2020 school year. While enrolled students were recorded as attending this class, there were no records of any class meeting, and no witness could verify the existence of the class. For approximately 10 students, this yearbook course was the only class in which they were enrolled at AFS in a particular year; others were enrolled in several other elective classes, such as journalism, and creative writing, under similarly questionable circumstances.

This investigation also revealed instances where grading protocols were not followed. For example, the investigation identified a few cases in which a student was placed on a teacher’s class roster, but the teacher never saw the student; nevertheless, the student received a passing grade.

To the extent that students remained on the rolls at AFS when they should have been withdrawn due to lack of attendance, the enrollment verification forms that school administrators signed were either false or misleading. A preliminary review conducted by City Schools staff identified approximately 28 students who were not actively attending AFS but remained on the rolls. Based on further review during the 2019-2020 school year, that number increased to approximately 100 students with questionable status during the period from the 2016-2017 school year through the 2019-2020 school year. Staff from City Schools’ central office and AFS addressed a number of potential funding issues during the 2019-2020 school year through corrections and adjustments to student enrollment status and scheduling that year. City Schools’ further review of student attendance, scheduling, and funding status, conducted using records obtained through the SIU investigation, indicates that there remain at least 69 instances involving 52 students, during the period from the 2016-2017 school year through the 2019-2020 school year, where suspicious actions by AFS staff resulted in questionable per-pupil funding for AFS that could not be documented or validated.

In addition to City Schools’ enrollment verification processes that include school scheduling reviews, roster validation by schools, and technical assistance for schools, City Schools’ enrollment is also verified by the Maryland State Department of Education (“MSDE”). Like other Maryland school systems, City Schools enrollment is verified through biannual enrollment audits conducted by MSDE, which serve as the state authority on funding status. MSDE completed its most recent biannual audits of City Schools in fall 2017 and fall 2019. In these audits, MSDE found that all AFS students whose files were reviewed met state funding requirements. City Schools welcomes further collaboration with MSDE to undertake appropriate funding reconciliation, as necessary, based on the results of this investigation.

**Key Finding #3: AFS operated credit recovery programs, including evening/twilight and summer school programs, that did not comply with City Schools requirements.**

Under state law and Board policies, students who fail a course are permitted to make up the credit through various credit recovery programs, such as evening/twilight and summer school programs, or they may repeat the course. At AFS, these credit recovery programs were not appropriately

managed. For example, contrary to City Schools protocols, unqualified and untrained teachers were allowed to provide instruction for credit recovery; teachers were listed as teachers of record, but when interviewed, they indicated that they had not taught the class; and students were improperly allowed to complete work packets, which are not acceptable for credit recovery. In a number of cases, City Schools did not ultimately award credit to AFS students participating in credit recovery programs because the documentation that school staff submitted was rejected by central office staff, due to insufficient content, misleading information, or failure to meet standards to receive a passing grade.

### **Corrective Actions Recommended and Underway**

The grading, enrollment, scheduling, and credit recovery issues identified through this thorough investigation represent a coordinated scheme by a small number of AFS staff to circumvent the extensive safeguards and monitoring that City Schools had in place, as well as the enrollment verification audits conducted by MSDE. While the unusual, sophisticated, and intentional nature of this scheme initially escaped detection, it was City Schools' own protocols that ultimately exposed the grading irregularities that triggered this investigation. Moreover, through this investigation, City Schools has identified a series of further precautions against the sort of deliberate efforts that individual AFS staff utilized to thwart established protocols. These enhancements will further City Schools' ongoing commitment to meet students' individual needs and provide meaningful pathways to graduation and career readiness.

- With respect to the grading issues identified, it is important to note that in May 2019, shortly before the AFS investigation began, the Board updated Policy IKA to strengthen grading guidance and practices. City Schools staff have developed protocols for reviewing requests for grade changes to ensure consistency with the updates to Board Policy IKA. For example, the grade change process now utilizes a technology platform, which permits better tracking and monitoring, as well as a historical grade auditing process; and City Schools is implementing checks and balances so that no single school staff person is solely responsible for any aspect of the grading entry or review process. Additional central office staff positions have been added that will support, review, and audit school grading practices.
- In addition to the verification process discussed above, City Schools has incorporated a series of enhancements into its enrollment and scheduling protocols in recent years. These enhancements include school scheduling reviews at the beginning of the school year to help ensure that students are fully scheduled consistent with their grade level; enrollment verification and roster validation by central office and school leaders; reviews of student transcripts to validate graduation status and ensure students are on track to graduate; and guidance to school leaders regarding student withdrawals, with review and approval by central office. Building upon the strong foundation created by existing and recently enacted safeguards, it is recommended that City Schools should further increase its review of student attendance and schedules through targeted school support and ongoing training on scheduling students to support academic success.
- Based on lessons learned from AFS and a thorough review of practices and protocols, City Schools released additional guidance on credit recovery for the 2020-2021 school year, with

further enhancements for summer school. For example, the Academics Office now reviews each school's credit recovery program, courses, and certification status of teachers; feedback leads to adjustments in practice. Once students complete credit recovery coursework, each teacher is required to complete an attestation process and upload major assignments for each student. These enhancements will be particularly beneficial as City Schools offers recovery programming to address unfinished learning resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.