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Acting Commissioner

October 25, 2024

Mr. Roger Leon, Superintendent
Newark Public Schools
765 Broad Street
Newark, New Jersey 07102

**SUBJECT: Newark Public Schools – Fun Day
OFAC Case #INV-062-24**

I. Introduction

The New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Fiscal Accountability and Compliance (OFAC) conducted a comprehensive review of an event hosted by Newark Public Schools (NPS) on Saturday, June 1, 2024. The event, titled "Central Office Staff Fun Day" (Fun Day), was held at Forest Lodge and included a variety of activities described as team-building and recreational in nature.

The purpose of this review was to evaluate whether the Fun Day adhered to the provisions of relevant New Jersey statutes and administrative codes, particularly as they pertain to the use of public funds and the eligibility for State aid reimbursement for the event's costs. Specifically, the review sought to determine whether the event aligned with the educational and professional development objectives required by law for the use of public funds.

II. Statutory and Regulatory Framework

The investigation was guided by the following statutes and administrative codes:

1. **N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-5.8(e)2** – This provision mandates that any district-sponsored activity must clearly align with the district's goals and objectives, particularly in relation to the use of public funds.
2. **N.J.S.A. 18A:11-12(a)** – This statute defines "training and seminars" as formal training events, including retreats, which are intended to discuss organizational goals and objectives in an educational or professional setting.
3. **N.J.S.A. 18A:11-12(a)1.d** – Defines a "retreat" as a meeting with school district employees held away from the normal work environment, during which organizational goals and objectives are discussed. Retreats should include discussions that focus on the district's goals and educational objectives.

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The NPS Board Policy on retreats mirrors the language of the statutes listed above and sets a similar expectation for events categorized as retreats or team-building activities.

III. Newark Public Schools' Justification for Fun Day

NPS justified the Fun Day event as supporting the district's strategic plan, specifically under Priority 3 of "The Next Decade: 2020-30 Strategic Plan," which focuses on cultivating a strength-based and responsive culture across the district. The specific goal referenced by NPS is:

Strategic Plan Priority 3: Strength-Based and Responsive Culture

- **Goal 3.1:** Communicate a shared vision and plan for developing, supporting, and sustaining positive culture and climate in all classrooms, schools, and departments across the district.

NPS contended that the Fun Day event was intended to promote team building and enhance a positive organizational culture, aligning with the district's broader goals for climate improvement.

IV. Review of Fun Day Agenda and Activities

The agenda provided by NPS for the Fun Day event included the following team-building and recreational activities:

- **Team-Building Activities (Facilitated by Forest Lodge):**
 - Team basketball and volleyball games
 - Egg toss competition
 - Free throw contests
 - Corn hole tournament
 - Inflatable axe throwing tournament
 - Specialty scavenger hunt
 - Letter formation challenge
 - Relay races
 - Limbo competition
 - Hole-in-one contest
 - Trivia games
 - Hula hoop contest

Additionally, several activities that were not listed under the "Team Building" heading were offered throughout the day, including:

- Rock Wall & Bungee Combo
- Retro arcade games (Pinball, Skee Ball, Pop-a-Shot Basketball, Claw Machine)
- Kiddie Korner (Temporary Tattoos, Spin Art, Duck Pond)
- Social Media Photo Booth with Prints
- Caricature artists
- Double Inflatable Axe Throwing

The event also included a 10-minute opening remark by the superintendent.

V. Observations and Findings

Upon review of the agenda and the activities carried out during Fun Day, several critical points were identified:

1. Lack of Educational or Professional Development Content:

The activities held during Fun Day were largely recreational and focused on leisure, competition, and amusement. There were no educational lectures, training seminars, or after-action discussions conducted to evaluate or reflect on the outcomes of team-building exercises.

2. Absence of NPS Leadership-Led Facilitation:

The team-building exercises were all facilitated by staff from Forest Lodge rather than NPS administrative personnel. There was no apparent direct involvement of district leadership in directing, overseeing, or structuring the team-building sessions in a manner that linked them to district goals.

3. Inconsistent with Retreat Definition:

While the event was held off-site, it did not meet the statutory definition of a "retreat" as outlined in N.J.S.A. 18A:11-12(a)1.d, which requires that retreats focus on discussions of organizational goals and objectives. The Fun Day event did not include formal sessions to discuss the district's strategic initiatives or foster professional growth among employees.

4. Lack of Alignment with N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-5.8(e)2:

The Fun Day activities, while fostering camaraderie, did not align with the specific educational or organizational goals required for events funded through public resources. The activities failed to support NPS's stated goals related to the development of a positive school culture in a substantive, goal-driven manner.

VI. Conclusion

The OFAC concludes that the Fun Day event hosted by Newark Public Schools on June 1, 2024, did not satisfy the requirements set forth in N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-5.8(e)2 and N.J.S.A. 18A:11-12(a) for State aid reimbursement. The event lacked an educational or professional development component and did not demonstrate a clear connection to the district's strategic objectives or organizational development. As a result, the costs associated with this event are not eligible for State aid.

- **Total Event Cost:** \$43,813.90
- **State Aid Percentage:** 76.8%
- **Disallowed State Aid Amount:** \$33,649.07

NPS is directed to refund the disallowed State aid portion of \$33,649.07 to the New Jersey Department of Education.

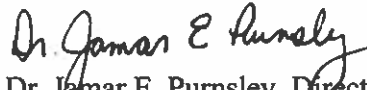
VII. Corrective Action Plan (CAP) and Next Steps

In accordance with N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-5.6, NPS must publicly review and discuss the findings of this report at a public board meeting within 30 days of receiving the report. Additionally, the Board is required to adopt a resolution certifying that the findings were discussed and either approve a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) or submit an appeal of any disputed findings.

The CAP must address the issues raised in this report, ensuring that future events align with statutory requirements and district goals. The resolution, along with the approved CAP and/or appeal, must be submitted to the Office of Fiscal Accountability and Compliance within 10 days of adoption.

Pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-5.6(c), the district must also post the findings of this report and the Board's CAP on the district's website. Should you have any questions, please contact Thomas C. Martin, Manager, Investigations Unit, at (609) 376-3606.

Sincerely,


Dr. Jamar E. Purnsley, Director
Office of Fiscal Accountability and Compliance

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Attachment

- c: Kevin Dehmer
- Laura Console
- Ambrose Duckett
- Paula Bloom
- Michael Yapple
- Joseph Zarra