

OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA INVESTIGATIVE REPORT SYNOPSIS

INTRODUCTION

The Office of the Inspector General for the School District of Philadelphia (OIG) received an allegation that two sibling students attending Philadelphia public schools were suspected to live outside of Philadelphia. The investigation substantiated this allegation and established that the students lived in New Jersey.

Living outside the geographical boundaries of Philadelphia and attending school in Philadelphia County without submitting appropriate documentation as to residency is a violation of School District Policy 202 and Sections 1301 and 1316 of the Pennsylvania Public School Code (24 Pa. Stat. Ann. §§ 13-1301, 13-1316). Accordingly, the OIG recommends that the parent or guardian for the students be billed the non-resident tuition for the time that they attended school in the District while living outside of Philadelphia County.

APPLICABLE POLICIES

Policy 200, Enrollment of Students

Per Board Policy 200, “school age resident students and eligible nonresident students shall be entitled to attend district schools. Enrollment requirements and administrative procedures shall apply to nonresident students approved to attend district schools, in accordance with [Board] policy. The district shall not enroll a student until the parent/guardian has submitted proof of the student's age, residence, and immunizations and a completed Parental Registration Statement, as required by law and regulations.”

Policy 202, Eligibility of Non-Resident Students

While the policy states that “[t]he School Reform Commission shall operate district schools for the benefit of students residing in the City of Philadelphia who are eligible for attendance[,]” non-resident students who meet certain requirements may also attend Philadelphia public schools.

REPORT FRAUD, WASTE, AND ABUSE

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THIS PUBLIC SYNOPSIS HAS BEEN REDACTED AND EDITTED FOR CONFIDENTIALITY. A MORE COMPREHENSIVE REPORT OF INVESTIGATION WAS SUBMITTED TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION, SUPERINTENDENT, AND OTHER APPROPRIATE DISTRICT SUPERVISORS.

“Before any eligible nonresident student may be accepted as a student in district schools, the [Board] requires that appropriate documentation verifying the student’s eligibility be submitted. The [Board] reserves the right to verify claims of residency, dependency and guardianship and to remove from school attendance a nonresident student whose claim is invalid. Admitted nonresident students shall receive the same benefits and be subject to the same responsibilities as resident students. The [Board] shall not be responsible for transportation to or from school for any nonresident student residing outside school district boundaries except when the transportation is required per the federal and state mandate (i.e. foster care or homeless students).”

The School District of Philadelphia shall deny the admission of a nonresident student to any school or academic program where such enrollment would displace a resident student or require the district to incur additional costs. However, regularly enrolled students whose parents/guardians have moved out of the school district may be permitted to remain in a school in which the student was appropriately enrolled until the last day of the that school year for pupils, upon district approval and payment of tuition by the parent/guardian or the district of residence. Tuition shall not be charged if a student is attending School District of Philadelphia schools and moves out of the city in the student’s senior year.

District policy as well as state statutes state that “[t]uition rates shall be determined annually in accordance with law. Tuition shall be charged monthly, in advance of attendance.”

Policy 202, Misrepresentation of Residency

The School District of Philadelphia reserves the right to unenroll and/or charge tuition fees for any misrepresentation of any information used to enroll in a School District of Philadelphia school. Misrepresentation of information used for this purpose may also constitute perjury, unsworn falsification to authorities, fraud and other offenses under the Pennsylvania Criminal Code. Suspected violations will be referred to Philadelphia District Attorney’s Office.

OIG INVESTIGATION

In September 2021, the OIG received a complaint alleging that the students’ mother purchased a home in New Jersey in February 2020, but continued to send the students to Philadelphia public schools. One of the students had even expressed concern about living in New Jersey but going to school in Philadelphia. The OIG was provided with the New Jersey address where the students were living as well as additional housing information.

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OIG investigators reviewed enrollment history for the students. Both students were enrolled in Philadelphia public schools for the current 2021-2022 school year and had been enrolled for the 2020-2021 school year. The enrollment information for the students contained conflicting Philadelphia addresses, and neither students' enrollment packet had a residential lease, deed, or utility bill from an address in Philadelphia to verify their residency. The OIG's investigation included querying various database and public records. The research determined that the student's mother had purchased a home in New Jersey in February 2020.

OIG investigators interviewed the students' mother. She denied living in New Jersey, and stated that she and her two children lived with family in Philadelphia. The children stayed in New Jersey only on the weekends. When asked about her name being on the deed for a home in New Jersey, the mother stated that she provided a down payment to her boyfriend, and co-owner, who lives in the New Jersey home. The mother submitted additional documents to verify her Philadelphia address to the OIG. Again, however, none of those items were a lease, deed, or utility bill. Shortly after the OIG's interview with the mother, she told OIG investigators that she was transferring one of her children to the New Jersey public school where her New Jersey house is located.

OIG investigators then went to the mother's New Jersey address. While she was not home at the time, several packages on the porch were addressed to her, and her boyfriend, who was home, indicated that she lived at that address. OIG investigators also visited a Philadelphia address where the mother alleged to be living, but no one appeared to be home.

Following OIG investigators' home visit, the mother contacted the OIG and contended that her one child who remained at a Philadelphia public school was living with her grandmother part time in Philadelphia and also living in New Jersey part time. The mother also stated that she does not receive financial help raising her children and she occasionally lived with her mother in Philadelphia. Despite the mother indicating financial strain and no permanent address of her own, she contended that the house in New Jersey was an investment property and not her permanent home.

Based on the deed in the mother's name for the house in New Jersey, her one child transferring to public school in New Jersey, packages addressed to the mother at the New Jersey address, and the mother's boyfriend stating that she lives at the New Jersey address, the OIG investigation concluded that her permanent residence is in New Jersey.

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CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based upon the information obtained during the investigation, the OIG established that the mother purchased a home in New Jersey in February 2020 and that her New Jersey house is her primary residence. While she and her children may occasionally stay with other family members in Philadelphia, they have not resided in Philadelphia since approximately February 2020. This is highlighted by the fact that the one child now attends public school in the New Jersey town where the mother's house is located and the co-owner of the New Jersey house – her boyfriend – stated that the mother lives there. While the mother plausibly suggested that she is financially strained and lives with her mother in Philadelphia, it is difficult to believe that she provided a down payment for a home that she does not live in while experiencing financial issues. The School District was never made aware that there was a change in residency for these students.

Considering all the facts established in this investigation, OIG recommends, in accordance with Pennsylvania Department of Education school district tuition rates, that the School District of Philadelphia Office of Child Accounting (OCA) generate a non-resident tuition invoice in the amount of \$24,904.40 for the one child and a tuition bill for the other student totaling \$13,232.22 for the 2020 – 2021 and 2021 – 2022 school years.

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