

OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

School District of Philadelphia

Investigative Report Synopsis

Introduction

In August 2022, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) for the School District of Philadelphia (District) received a complaint that a District employee falsified their resume and employment application by falsely claiming they received a bachelor's degree. As a result of this information, the OIG initiated an investigation which ultimately substantiated that the employee fabricated their educational credentials. The employee's reliance and use of a fake bachelor's degree violates the District's Code of Ethics.

Applicable Policy

False Documents and Statements

Submission of false documents and statements violates basic ethical standards of the District. The Code requires that employees “[avoid] any form of fraud, falsification, misrepresentation, or deception in the statements [they] make and the records [they] keep while doing [their] jobs.” The Code states, “[a]ll School District employees should conduct themselves in a manner that promotes and supports the development of good character by teaching, enforcing, advocating and modeling ethical principles.” The Code of Ethics' core principles require that all employees are expected to be honest, take responsibility and demonstrate accountability for their actions, obey all laws and regulations, and represent the School District in a manner that engenders public trust in its integrity and competence.

Investigation and Findings

The investigation substantiated that the District employee submitted fabricated education credentials which the District relied upon when promoting the employee to a new position.

On August 29, 2022, the OIG received a complaint that stated a District employee claimed to have graduated from a university with a bachelor's degree but, in actuality, they had not obtained such a degree let alone attended the university. The employee had relied on these faulty credentials when applying for a promotion. Rather than submitting transcripts from the university, the employee attached a photograph of their diploma. The investigation disclosed that the employee had not received a degree as indicated on the diploma, and the employee had not been a registered student at the university.

REPORT FRAUD, WASTE, AND ABUSE

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After receiving this information, investigators spoke with the employee. When confronted with the fact that their degree could not be verified, the employee had no explanation and expressed little surprise though assured OIG investigators that they had a bachelor's degree. The employee confirmed that they had not used another name while supposedly attending the university. Based on the employee's repeated assurances, investigators instructed the employee to request transcripts from the university, since the employee had not previously provided them as required in the application process. On September 22, 2022, the employee provided investigators a partial screenshot that indicated they had submitted a request for transcripts. In a status update, the employee told OIG investigators that they would not be able to get their transcripts because of an outstanding balance on their account.

OIG investigators contacted the university again and inquired about the process of obtaining a transcript even though a student has an outstanding account balance. The university responded that "[s]tudents who owe a balance greater than \$100 at the time of graduation would not receive a diploma or a transcript until the balance is resolved. Those students ARE reported to the National Student Clearinghouse as having earned a degree in order to support students obtaining employment that will allow them to benefit from the earned degree and ultimately pay any remaining balance so they can access the diploma and transcript." (Emphasis in original). At the time of this report, the employee still had not received or submitted a copy of their transcripts.

OIG investigators requested that Class and Compensation re-evaluate the employee's credentials to determine if they would have been eligible to apply for the promotional position without a bachelor's degree. Class and Compensation determined that the employee did possess sufficient work experience in conjunction with their associate's degree to have been eligible for the position. Additionally, the employee's promotional salary was re-evaluated and determined to have been equitable with other similarly situated employees. However, other applicants applied for the same position who may have been more qualified. Thus, the District erroneously relied on the employee's educational credentials in promoting them.

Despite the lack of equity and parity concerns, the employee used their fraudulent bachelor's degree to qualify for the promotional position, and the District relied on this fraudulent information in promoting them. Due to the employee applying for the promotional position internally, the employee was not required to resubmit their educational credentials, undergo a new physical, or provide new clearances as long as current clearances were still valid. The OIG could not determine whether the employee relied on their fraudulent educational credentials in 2018 when the employee applied for and received a previous promotional position.

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Conclusions and Recommendations

The OIG recommended disciplinary action consistent with the District's policy for the employee's use and reliance on fraudulent educational credentials. The employee's continued charade and web of excuses as to why they could not retrieve the transcripts further exacerbated the problem, and the employee's actions contravened the Code's requirement to have each employee "advocate[] and model[] ethical principles[,] as well as "demonstrate accountability for their actions[.]" Additionally, by applying for and ultimately obtaining a promotional position based on faulty credentials, the employee placed their thumb on the scale in comparison to the hiring pool, allowing themselves to falsely and inequitably be compared to other candidates with similar, valid credentials.

Talent clearly requires sealed transcripts from new, outside employees when their job is premised on educational qualifications. However, this does not appear to be a requirement for current employees who apply for and received promotional jobs, even if the employee's new job is premised on educational qualifications that may not have been needed in their former District position.

OIG also recommended that the District strengthen the procedures for promoting internal candidates, specifically by submitting or resubmitting educational credentials when a degree is required for the new position and vetting the credentials. While, in this instance, there is no apparent direct loss to the District or that Talent overlooked another more qualified applicant for the same position, the systemic nature of the fraud embeds itself in the employee's work history and casts doubt on whether the employee's earlier positions and salaries were justified. The District should aim to ensure that hiring decisions are not built on faulty foundations, even in situations involving promotional employment for internal candidates.

After the issuance of this report, the employee was terminated and a do not hire designation was placed in the employee's file.

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