

Franklin Legal, LLC

February 10, 2025

RE: [REDACTED]
Reference: #25-195

Dear Parties:

The independent investigator assigned by the Maryland State Department (MSDE), Division of Early Intervention and Special Education Services (DEI/SES), has completed the investigation complaint regarding special education services for the above-referenced student. This correspondence is the report on the final results of the investigation.

The independent investigator investigated the following allegations:

1. MSDE has not ensured that proper procedures were followed when responding to a State complaint filed by the complainant on December 20, 2023. Specifically, MSDE did not review all relevant evidence and make an independent determination as to whether IDEA violations occurred in accordance with 34 CFR § 300.151, 300.152, and COMAR 13A.05.01.15.¹
2. MSDE has not ensured that the superintendent was adequately prepared and/or trained to correctly identify the dates of multiple allegations when responding to a State complaint filed by the complainant on December 20, 2023, in accordance with 34 CFR § 300.156.
3. MSDE has not followed proper monitoring procedures regarding implementation of 34 CFR § 300.152, in accordance with 34 CFR § 300.600, since February 19, 2024.

¹ The Letter of Initiation in this matter indicated that the complainant alleged that MSDE did not issue a Letter of Findings within sixty days of the date this complaint was filed. This was an error.

4. MSDE does not have appropriate policies and procedures in effect to ensure that the LEA complied with 34 CFR § 300.613.

BACKGROUND:

The student is 19 years old, is identified as a student with Autism under the IDEA and has an IEP that requires the provision of special education and related services. At the time of this complaint, the student was placed by the PGCPs at [REDACTED].

FINDINGS OF FACT:

1. Complaint 24-107 was filed on December 20, 2023 and the Letter of Findings was issued on February 6, 2024.
2. The Letter of Findings in complaint 24-107 provided information about what steps to take if there were concerns about the accuracy of the findings of the investigator.
3. The complainant did not submit additional information to MSDE after receipt of the Letter of Findings.
4. MSDE has a “Standard Operating Procedure” document for its investigators that includes steps to take from the outset of the investigation through its conclusion.
5. The complaint investigator followed the “Standard Operating Procedure” during the investigation of complaint 24-107.
6. In a solicitation posted by the Maryland State Department of Education, October 15, 2024, titled “Special Education Compliance Investigator,” the qualifications included a background in special education, experience working with special education laws and regulations on a federal and state level ([REDACTED] preferred), experience conducting investigations, excellent writing skills and the ability to write technical reports, and a proven ability to work independently and conduct legal research.
7. Complaint investigators are designated by the superintendent to conduct complaint investigations. Complaint 24-107 was investigated by Alison Barmat, Branch Chief, Family Support and Dispute Resolution Branch, MSDE. Ms. Barmat is familiar with the Standard Operating Procedure document used by Maryland Complaint Investigators and followed these procedures during the investigation process. Ms. Barmat has worked in the field of special education since 1978 and is licensed to practice law in the District of Columbia as well as Maryland. She is well-versed in the legal requirements associated with state complaint investigations and IDEA compliance. Likewise, the superintendent is well-versed in special education laws and regulations at both the federal and state levels.

8. MSDE has a monitoring system in place to ensure that school districts satisfy IDEA requirements. This system includes components to increase the level of monitoring and technical assistance provided to school districts failing to meet IDEA compliance standards over a period of time. MSDE has increased the level of monitoring and technical assistance provided to PGCPS over a period of time based upon findings made in recent monitoring activities. PGCPS is currently in the “Focused” Tier of General Supervision and Support and is monitored for compliance with IDEA requirements every two years.
9. During fiscal year 2024, there were twelve complaints filed against PGCPS that included an allegation that 34 CFR § 300.613 was not being implemented appropriately, three of which were filed by the complainant. Six of those allegations were substantiated. In each instance, MSDE ordered appropriate corrective action and is ensuring that all corrective action is being completed by PGCPS.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS:

The complainant alleges that MSDE did not follow proper procedures while investigating complaint 24-107.

34 CFR § 300.152 requires that the state education agency (SEA) carry out an independent investigation, give the complainant the opportunity to submit additional information about the allegations in the complaint, provide the public agency an opportunity to respond, review all relevant information and make an independent determination as to whether the public agency is violating a requirement of Part B of the IDEA, and issue a written decision that addresses each allegation in the complaint and contains findings of fact and conclusions as well as the reasons for the SEA’s final decision.

The Letter of Findings for complaint 24-107 addresses the allegation made in the complaint. The information provided by the complainant in the current complaint goes far beyond the information included and the specific allegation made in complaint 24-107. In the Letter of Findings for complaint 24-107, it is clearly stated that these findings are considered final “new, previously unavailable documentation is submitted within 15 (15) days of the date of this correspondence.” No additional documentation was submitted within that time frame. If the complainant believed that the findings in the complaint were inaccurate, the appropriate remedy for this would have been to submit additional information if such information existed. Additionally, the language in the current complaint is evidence of disagreement with the outcome of the investigation rather than additional, previously unavailable documentation indicating that the complaint was not properly investigated.

Based on Findings of Fact #1 through #5, the independent investigator finds that MSDE has satisfied its requirements under 34 CFR § 300.152. Therefore, there is no violation with respect to Allegations #1 and #3.

Based on Findings of Fact #6 and #7, the independent investigator finds that MSDE satisfied the requirements of 34 CFR § 300.156 and 34 CFR § 300.160 and finds no violation with respect to Allegation #2. The IDEA does not include any specific requirements for individuals conducting state special education complaint investigations. All MSDE employees involved in each stage of the investigation process hold appropriate Maryland licensure for their respective positions, have earned degrees relevant to this field of work, and are highly experienced in the implementation and review of IDEA requirements and state and federal regulations.

Based on Findings of Fact #8 and #9, the independent investigator finds that MSDE has satisfied its requirements under 34 CFR § 300.600 to ensure that PGCPs is in compliance with 34 CFR § 300.613. Therefore, there is no violation with respect to Allegation #4.

As of the date of this correspondence, this Letter of Findings is considered final. This office will not reconsider the conclusions reached in this Letter of Findings unless new, previously unavailable documentation is submitted and received by this office within fifteen (15) days of the date of this correspondence. The new documentation must support a written request for reconsideration, and the written request must include a compelling reason why the documentation was not made available during the investigation. Pending this office's decision on a request for reconsideration, the public agency must implement any corrective actions within the timelines reported in this Letter of Findings.

The parties maintain the right to request mediation or to file a due process complaint, if they disagree with the identification, evaluation, placement, or provision of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for the student, including issues subject to this State complaint investigation, consistent with the IDEA. MSDE recommends that this Letter of Findings be included with any request for mediation or a due process complaint.

Sincerely,

Michael Franklin
Independent Investigator

c: Millard House, II, Superintendent, PGCPs
Trinell Bowman, Associate Superintendent, PGCPs
Darnell Henderson, General Counsel, PGCPs
William Fields, Associate General Counsel, PGCPs
Keith Marston, Supervisor, Special Education Compliance, PGCPs
Lois Jones-Smith, Liaison, Special Education Compliance, PGCPs
Dr. Antoine L. Hickman, Assistant State Superintendent, Division of Early Intervention
and Special Education Services, MSDE
Tracy Givens, Section Chief, Dispute Resolution, MSDE
Dr. Paige Bradford, Section Chief, Performance Support and Technical Assistance,
MSDE
Dr. Brian Morrison, Branch Chief, Policy and Accountability, MSDE
Alison Barmat, Branch Chief, Family Support and Dispute Resolution Branch, MSDE