

September 29, 2005

Hon. Joel I. Klein
Chancellor
New York City Public Schools
Department of Education
52 Chambers Street, Room 314
New York, NY 10007

Re: Maurice Collins
SCI Case #2005-2279

Dear Chancellor Klein:

An investigation conducted by this office has found that Maurice Collins, a principal assigned to the A. Philip Randolph Campus High School at City College (“Randolph”) in Manhattan, disseminated a letter (“the letter”) to parents in which he included a section about filling out applications for free lunch.¹ In it, Collins gave improper advice to Randolph parents about the entry of certain information on the form. He also wrongly asserted that a student’s MetroCard would be withheld until the completed form was returned to Randolph.

This investigation began on September 1, 2005, when General Counsel Michael Best forwarded to this office an e-mail message from a member of the Randolph staff who complained about the letter from Collins to the parents.

Investigators from this office contacted the staff member and obtained a copy of the letter.² A review of the letter, dated August 26, 2005, revealed that it contained important and appropriate information about the start of the impending school year. The

¹ Effective September 6, 2005, pending the outcome of this investigation, Collins was reassigned to the Regional Operations Center.

² There were both English and Spanish versions of the letter.

lunch application section correctly explained the impact that completed forms would have for Randolph, that is, an extra million dollars in the budget, which the school had come close to losing the year before. However, Collins incorrectly advised the parents as follows:

“...estimate your income conservatively. **The lower you estimate your income the better for the school budget.**³ If you work more than one job, only put down the income from one job on the form. Each student must return to the school his/her lunch form completed and signed by parent(s) in order to receive a metro card. **NO LUNCH FORM, NO METRO CARD.**”⁴

Following Collins’s advice could have resulted in serious consequences for Randolph parents. The parent must sign the lunch application and certify that “all of the information is true and all income is reported.” The certification continues that “deliberate misrepresentation of the information may subject [the parent] to prosecution under applicable State and Federal laws, and [the parent’s] children may lose meal benefits.” Moreover, the MetroCard program is distinct from the lunch program and it was inappropriate to link them.

Shortly after our investigation began, Michael Best forwarded another e-mail to this office; this one from Collins to Region officials, dated September 3, 2005, which offered an apology for the “innocent mistake” in the letter. According to the principal, he “believed that parents were only obligated to report their main source of income” and was looking to avert the “tendency to exaggerate their income due to pride rather than reporting true income level.” He further explained that it was not his intention to “misguide” parents and, to avoid doing just that, had included with the letter a copy of official instructions for completing the form. Collins acknowledged that he “did not phrase his intentions well” and requested permission to send out a revised version of the letter.

Region officials did not distribute Collins’s revised edition, but did correct the mistake in the letter. In a letter dated September 6, 2005, Region 10 Local Instructional Superintendent (“LIS”) Francesca Pena notified parents that Collins had been reassigned pending the outcome of the investigation and introduced the interim principal.⁵ She also informed them that Collins’s August 26th letter contained incorrect information about filling out lunch forms, advised them to complete the documents truthfully, and reminded them to refer to the instructions. Pena stressed the importance of following the federal guidelines when completing the form.

³ The bold font was used by the principal in the letter.

⁴ The bold all caps font was used by the principal in the letter.

⁵ This letter was in English and Spanish. That interim principal has been replaced by another interim principal. In English and Spanish, Pena notified the parents of that change, as well. Both replacements previously held the position of principal before retiring from the New York City school system.

Collin's letter and his reassignment were the subject of a New York Post article, *Principal booted in lunch-money 'scam,'* on page 2, of the September 6, 2005, paper.

In an interview with Maurice Collins conducted in the presence of his union representative, investigators from this office learned that, prior to distributing the letter to parents, he sent it by e-mail to Assistant Principal of Guidance Virginia Tomlinson who translated it into Spanish, Assistant Principal for Humanities Kierra Foster-Ba, and LIS Pena with a "cc" to Superintendent Gale Reeves. Pena replied: "Your letter is excellent and very informative. It looks like you are ready for action and I love that!" After the letter was disseminated, Collins received an e-mail message from a parent who wrote: "What fantastic news your letter to the parents had: 350 incoming ninth graders, lockers out of the way, crack-down on graffiti, lunch forms vs metro cards, etc.! While the letter might have seemed long, it was jam packed with vital information for parents and students alike. Thanks, [name omitted]."

Collins informed investigators that, on September 1st, Pena alerted him to a problem with the letter and, upon reviewing it, he realized his intentions were not stated clearly and could be open to misinterpretation. Collins confirmed his regret at making the mistake in his phrasing of the instructions, asserted that he did not mean to mislead anyone, and explained that he just wanted to get the lunch forms returned. The principal expressed remorse for the stress he had caused and reported that he had learned a valuable lesson. According to Collins, he planned to vet future correspondence through the Regional attorneys.

Francesca Pena informed investigators that she did not read the letter thoroughly and missed Collins's instructions about filling out the lunch application. The LIS explained that she had returned from vacation the day before receiving the letter, which was sent for her information, not for her approval.⁶ According to Pena, she scanned Collins's e-mail with the attached letter on her BlackBerry device and thought some of the points were very good. The LIS added that, in a conversation about the letter, she told Collins it was a good idea to send the lunch application with it.

Pena reported that the opening of school at Randolph went very well because the interim principal followed Collins's plans. The LIS also met with parents and students who expressed support for Collins and suggested a protest at City Hall to have him returned to the school.⁷

⁶ Pena explained that when Collins was a new principal she would read and comment on his letters, but had stopped doing so. Pena reported that she felt "terrible" and had she read the letter more closely "this could have been stopped."

⁷ The assigned investigator also received some correspondence in support of Collins.

As Pena had, Superintendent Gale Reeves informed investigators that Collins sent the letter to her for information only and did not ask her to review it. In fact, Reeves reported that she read only page 3 which included the changes in assistant principals. According to the Superintendent, Collins worked very hard over the summer preparing for the opening day of school at Randolph. Reeves added that the parents supported the principal and thought Collins "just made a mistake."

We are referring our findings for your information and appropriate action.

We are forwarding a copy of this letter and of our report concerning this investigation to the Office of Legal Services. Should you have any inquiries regarding the above, please contact First Deputy Commissioner Regina Loughran, the attorney assigned to the case. She can be reached at (212) 510-1426. Please notify First Deputy Commissioner Loughran within thirty days of receipt of this letter of what, if any, action has been taken or is contemplated regarding Maurice Collins. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

RICHARD J. CONDON
Special Commissioner
of Investigation for the
New York City School District

By: _____

Regina A. Loughran
First Deputy Commissioner

RJC:RAL:gm

c: Michael Best, Esq.
Theresa Europe, Esq.