

February 15, 2012

Hon. Dennis M. Walcott  
Chancellor  
New York City Public Schools  
Department of Education  
52 Chambers Street, Room 314  
New York, NY 10007

Re: Melissa Dean  
SCI Case #2011-5739

Dear Chancellor Walcott:

An investigation conducted by this office has substantiated that Melissa Dean, a teacher assigned to PS 143 in Queens, used the students in her class to send handmade holiday greeting cards to her friend, John Coccarelli, who is a convicted felon serving time in the Groveland Correctional Facility in upstate New York.<sup>1</sup> Dean suggested that the students write personal information on the cards, including their names and addresses, and she printed the name of the student on the back of his or her card. Dean did not obtain permission from the parents or the school administration to allow the children to correspond with the inmate.

This investigation began on December 27, 2011, when Deputy Counsel to the Chancellor Theresa Europe forwarded to the office of the Special Commissioner of Investigation (“SCI”) an e-mail message from Principal Sheila Gorski who lodged a complaint against Dean.

An SCI investigator spoke by telephone with New York State Correction Officer (“CO”) Blonsky assigned to the Groveland Correctional Facility (“Groveland”) located in Sonyea, Livingston County, New York. CO Blonsky said that, on December 23, 2011, during her assignment to the Security Division, she opened an envelope addressed to Prisoner John Coccarelli which had been sent by Melissa Dean. CO Blonsky added

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<sup>1</sup> Dean was reassigned to the Extended Use Office in Long Island City.

that the mail was deemed to be inappropriate for Coccarelli to possess, given his criminal history, and it was not delivered to him. CO Blonsky explained that Coccarelli was incarcerated based on convictions in Nassau County for Criminal Contempt 1<sup>st</sup> Degree – violation of an Order of Protection, a Class E felony, and Attempted Criminal Possession of a Weapon 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree – possession of a loaded firearm, a Class D felony.

According to CO Blonsky, she reviewed the content of the envelope – handmade holiday cards – and determined that they came from students at PS 143 in Corona, New York. CO Blonsky notified her supervisor, Lieutenant Conrad, who in turn contacted Groveland Superintendent Sandra Amoia. CO Blonsky said that Amoia called PS 143 and spoke with Principal Gorski; Superintendent Amoia then instructed Lieutenant Conrad to place Dean’s correspondence to Coccarelli in an official Groveland envelope and mail it back to Principal Gorski by USPS.

In a telephone conversation with the assigned investigator during the holiday break, Principal Gorski explained that, on December 23, 2011, she received a telephone call from Groveland Superintendent Amoia who reported that Prisoner John Coccarelli had received an envelope in the mail which prison officials found to be suspicious given the nature of Coccarelli’s criminal history. Amoia informed Gorski that the envelope was from Melissa Dean and contained handmade holiday cards colored with crayons. Closer examination showed that the cards came from PS 143 in Queens. Gorski confirmed that Dean was a teacher at the school.<sup>2</sup> Superintendent Amoia told the principal that she would send the envelope with its contents to Gorski by USPS.

After speaking with the investigator, Principal Gorski contacted the school and advised the custodian that an SCI investigator was headed to PS 143 to retrieve the package, which had just arrived. The envelope contained 27 handmade holiday cards. Many had drawings in crayon and most included handwritten messages wishing the recipient Merry Christmas or some other holiday greeting. Some cards contained messages which were more specific and at least two cards noted the address of the student artist. One child, with whom investigators did not speak, wrote his name and his address, and also explained that his cousin lived next door. Each card had the name of the student who made the card printed on the back. Two cards were directly associated with Dean: one emanated from Dean’s daughter and contained the greeting: “Hi John. This is [first name]. I hope you have a Merry Christmas. ☺” The second was “from your Wifey” which was signed with a drawing of a heart followed by “Melissa.”

SCI investigators met with Principal Gorski who said that, after her conversation with Groveland Superintendent Amoia, she called Dean into her office to question her

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<sup>2</sup> Gorski said that Dean taught an English as a Second Language 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class.

about the situation.<sup>3</sup> Dean told Gorski: “I do know John Coccarelli” and “he is my friend.” Gorski asked whether Dean knew that Coccarelli was incarcerated at Groveland and Dean replied: “Yes.” Dean said that Coccarelli was in Groveland for a violation of an Order of Protection. According to Gorski, Dean admitted that she did not have permission from the school to send the student work out of the building. Dean asserted to Gorski that she felt it was not a school-related matter and reported that she mailed the package from a Post Office on Long Island. Dean told Gorski that she “thought it was a nice thing to do.” Gorski informed investigators that Dean’s voice was quivering as she spoke with the principal. Gorski added that Dean declined to speak further.

SCI investigators attempted to interview 19 students (“Student A” through “Student S”) out of the 25 PS 143 students who created cards; they met with 15 students and three mothers. SCI investigators spoke with 10-year-old female Student A and her mother. Student A said that she was in Dean’s 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class at PS 143. Student A identified the card she made and explained that, during December 2011, Dean had the class draw Christmas cards that a friend of Dean’s would send to persons without family and who were lonely. Student A explained that Dean told the class to write about who they were and where they and their family were from and to write their names and addresses in the card if they wanted to receive a card back. In her card, Student A wrote her name and informed the recipient that she was from New York, but her mother was from Mexico. According to Student A, Dean said that all of the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade classes in the school were making cards. Student A added that Dean did not tell the class anything about the man or lady who was receiving the cards. Student A reported that Dean did not ask the class members to obtain permission from their parents to write the card. Student A’s mother informed investigators that she did not give permission for Student A to participate in and did not know anything about the Christmas card project.

SCI investigators visited the residence of 10-year-old male Student B, but no one was home. They left a business card for his parents.

SCI investigators met with 10-year-old female Student C and her mother. Student C said that she was in Dean’s 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and she identified the card she made in class. Student C explained that, in December 2011, Dean told the class that she had a friend, whom she did not name, who just had a baby and this lady was going to send Christmas cards to homeless and lonely people who did not have anyone. Student C added that Dean instructed the class to draw Christmas cards which she would give to her friend to send out. According to Student C, Dean told the class members to write something about themselves and their families in the card and to include their names and addresses if they wanted to receive a card back. Student C explained that she did not write her name or anything about herself because her mother would be mad if she did.

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<sup>3</sup> The UFT chapter chair represented Dean and an assistant principal also was present during the meeting.

According to Student C, Dean did not give any identifying information about the person who was getting the cards and she did not ask the class members to obtain permission from their parents to make the cards. Student C's mother added that she did not know anything about and did not give her permission for the Christmas card project.

SCI investigators visited the residence of 10-year-old male Student D and spoke with him and his mother. Student D said that he was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and he identified the card he had drawn. Student D added that, in December 2011, Dean asked the class to make a Christmas card for people who were not around their families, like people in the Navy or people who did not have a family. Dean did not identify the person or people who were receiving the cards. According to Student D, Dean instructed the class members to describe themselves in the card and to write their names and addresses if they wanted to receive a card in return. Student D wrote his name and address on the card because he wanted the person to send a card back to him. Student D explained that Dean collected the cards and told the class that she was going to give them to someone, not identified, who would send them out. Student D did not know whether any other class made cards. Student D's mother added that she did not know anything about and did not give her permission for the Christmas card project.

SCI investigators visited the residence of 10-year-old male Student E, but no one was home. They left a business card for his parents.

SCI investigators met with 10-year-old female Student F who said that she was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and she identified the card she made.<sup>4</sup> Student F added that, during the last week before the vacation in December 2011, Dean had the class make Christmas cards which she was going to give to a person whom she did not identify. Student F explained that the cards were completed over a two-day period. According to Student F, Dean asked her to write her name on the card, but she did not do so, and Dean wrote Student F's name on the card. On her card, Student F wrote that Dean was "the best teacher because she put video[s]" on and did not give a lot "of homework." Student F reported that Dean did not ask the class members to obtain permission from their parents to give out the cards; investigators did not speak with her parents.

SCI investigators spoke with 10-year-old male Student G who said that he was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and he identified his handmade card. Student G added that, during the last week before vacation in December 2011, Dean had the class members make Christmas cards and asked them to write about themselves if they wanted to, but Student G chose not to do so; Dean wrote his name on the card. Student G reported that the cards were completed over a two-day period. According to Student G, Dean did not ask the class members to obtain permission from their parents to send out the cards; investigators did not speak with his parents.

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<sup>4</sup> Student F has turned 11.

SCI investigators met with 11-year-old female Student H who said that she was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and she identified the card she created. Student H added that during the last week before the vacation in December 2011, Dean asked the class to make Christmas cards for someone in the school, but she did not say a name. Student H explained that the cards were completed over a two-day period. Dean asked Student H to put her name on the card, but Dean wrote Student H's name on the card. According to Student H, Dean did not ask the class members to obtain permission from their parents to send out the cards; investigators did not speak with her parents.

SCI investigators spoke with 10-year-old female Student I who said that she was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and she identified the card she made. Student I added that, during the last week before the vacation in December 2011, Dean asked the class to make Christmas cards for people in the hospital who were sick; the cards were completed over a two-day period. According to Student I, Dean instructed the class members to write their names on the cards, but did not tell them to put their addresses; Dean wrote Student I's name on the card. Student I reported that Dean did not ask the class members to obtain permission from their parents to give out the cards; investigators did not speak with her parents.

SCI investigators met with 10-year-old male Student J who said that he was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and he identified the card he drew.<sup>5</sup> Student J explained that, in December 2011, Dean asked the class to make Christmas cards for lonely people or people who had no families; Dean said that she would give the cards to someone who would send them out. According to Student J, Dean advised the students that, if they wanted to receive a card back, they should write their names on the cards, but Dean did not tell the students to put their addresses on the cards. Dean wrote Student J's name on his card. Student J added that the cards were completed over a two-day period. Student J reported that Dean did not ask the class members to obtain permission from their parents to send out the cards; investigators did not speak with his parents.

SCI investigators spoke with 10-year-old female Student K who said that she was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and she identified the card she made. Student K added that, in December 2011, Dean had the class make Christmas cards; it took two days to finish the cards. Student K heard from some of her classmates that Dean said the cards were for friends. Dean asked Student K to write her name on the card, but did not say why. Dean wrote Student K's name on the back of the card. Student K confirmed that Dean did not ask the class members to obtain permission from their parents to give out the cards; investigators did not speak with her parents.

SCI investigators met with 11-year-old male Student L who said that he was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and he identified his handmade card. Student L added that, in

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<sup>5</sup> Student J has turned 11.

December 2011, Dean asked the class to make Christmas cards, but Student L did not remember what Dean said about who would receive the cards. Student L reported that they worked on the card for two days. According to Student L, Dean advised the class to fold the picture in half, because it would look better. Student L recalled that Dean also told the class members to put their names and where they lived on the cards, but did not say anything about getting a card back. Dean wrote Student L's name the back of the card. Student L reported that Dean did not ask the class members to obtain permission from parents to make the cards; investigators did not speak with his parents.

SCI investigators spoke with 10-year-old female Student M who said that she was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and she identified the card she created. Student M added that, in December 2011, Dean asked the class to make cards for people who did not get cards at Christmas, like maybe people in the hospital. Student M explained that Dean told the class to fold the picture in half and they worked on the card for two days. Dean advised Student M to put her name on the card so that the people who got the card would know who gave it to them; Dean wrote Student M's name on the back of the card. Student M reported that Dean did not ask the class members to obtain permission from their parents to make or send out the cards; investigators did not speak with her parents.

Student N, a 10-year-old male, was absent on the day when SCI investigators spoke with the 5<sup>th</sup> Graders from Dean's class.

SCI investigators met with 10-year-old male Student O who said that he was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and he identified the card he drew. Student O added that, in December 2011, Dean had the class make Christmas cards, but Dean did not say who would receive the cards. Student O reported that Dean told the class members to write something about themselves and to put their names and class on the cards.<sup>6</sup> Dean wrote Student O's name on the back of the card. According to Student O, it took two days to make the cards and Dean told the students to fold the picture in half to make it like a book. Student O confirmed that Dean did not tell the class members to ask their parents for permission to make or send the cards; investigators did not speak with his parents.

Student P, a 10-year-old male, was absent on the day when SCI investigators spoke with the 5<sup>th</sup> Graders from Dean's class.

SCI investigators met with 10-year-old male Student Q who said that he was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and he identified the card he made. Student Q added that, in December 2011, Dean told the class to make Christmas cards, but Dean did not say who the cards were for or where they were going. Dean advised the class members to write their names on the cards so the person who received the cards would know who they

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<sup>6</sup> Some of the children identified the school or wrote their class number.

came from; Dean wrote Student Q's name on the back of the card. According to Student Q, Dean told the students to fold the picture in half and it took two days to make the cards. Student Q reported that Dean did not tell the class members to ask their parents for permission to make or give out the cards; investigators did not speak with his parents.

SCI investigators spoke with 10-year-old male Student R who said that he was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and he identified the card he created. Student R added that, in December 2011, Dean told the class members to make a Christmas card, and to write something in it, for people who did not have a home or did not feel well. According to Student R, Dean advised the students to write their names on the cards, so the person who received the cards would know who they came from; Student R wrote his name on the card. Student R reported that it took one day to make the card. Student R confirmed that Dean did not ask the class members to obtain permission from their parents to make or give out the cards; investigators did not speak with his parents.

SCI investigators met with 11-year-old female Student S who said that she was in Dean's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class and she identified her handmade card. Student S added that, in December 2011, Dean instructed the class members to make a Christmas card for people who had no family, to write something in it about themselves, and to put their names on the card; it took two days to finish the card. According to Student S, Dean told the class: "If you write something nice to them, they will write back to us." On her card, Student S informed the recipient that she "take[s] care of my aunt because she is way sick." Student S reported that Dean did not tell the class members to write their address on the card, but Dean wrote Student S's name on the card. Student S confirmed that Dean did not ask the class members to obtain permission from their parents to make or send out the cards; investigators did not speak with her parents.

A review of documentation received from Groveland revealed that Dean was included in the "Visitor and Package Registration System" and Dean's listed relationship on Coccarelli's "Inmate's Log of Visits" was "Friend." Dean visited Coccarelli on 11 occasions, always on a Saturday or a Sunday; the first recorded visit date was November 21, 2010, and the last visit noted was November 19, 2011.

A review of the Groveland "Phone Number Registration" for Coccarelli included Dean as a "Friend" who was authorized to receive calls from the inmate; her registration was activated on December 6, 2010. All calls must be outgoing from Coccarelli; inmates are not permitted to receive incoming calls. The records showed 327 completed calls from Coccarelli to Dean between September 7, 2011 and January 3, 2012. Additional calls were not completed and were noted as "call not accept."

Through her attorney, Melissa Dean declined the opportunity to speak with investigators from this office.

It is the recommendation of this office that Melissa Dean's employment be terminated, that she be made ineligible for work with the Department of Education, and that this matter be considered should she apply for any position in the New York City school system, with one of its vendors, or in one of its facilities, in the future.

We are referring our findings to Queens County District Attorney Richard A. Brown for whatever action he deems appropriate.

We note that the conduct described here may violate the conflicts of interest provisions of the New York City Charter which is administered by the New York City Conflicts of Interest Board.

We are forwarding a copy of this letter and of our report concerning this investigation to the Office of Legal Services. We also are sending our findings to the New York State Education Department for whatever action it deems appropriate. 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 30 days of receipt of this letter of what, if any, action has been taken or is contemplated regarding Melissa Dean. 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.