

City Of New York
THE SPECIAL COMMISSIONER OF INVESTIGATION
FOR THE NEW YORK CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

July 19, 2024

Hon. David C. Banks
Chancellor
New York City Public Schools
Department of Education
52 Chambers Street, Room 314
New York, NY 10007

Re: Michele Cenci
Anthony Cosentino
SCI Case #: 2023-3992

Dear Chancellor Banks:

An investigation conducted by this office has substantiated that New York City Department of Education (“DOE”) School Secretary Michele Cenci (“Cenci”), previously assigned to the Margaret P. Emery Elm Park School (“MEEPS”) on Staten Island, stole money from the DOE by forging official documents, including checks that she deposited into her personal bank accounts.¹ Furthermore, MEEPS Principal Anthony Cosentino (“Cosentino”) disregarded Chancellor Regulations and DOE Deferred Compensation Plan (“DCP”) rules and failed to properly supervise Cenci, or take corrective action when initial allegations were made against Cenci in 2021, resulting in Cenci’s theft of over \$100,000.²

¹ As a result of this investigation, Cenci was reassigned, and a problem code was attached to her personnel file. On December 21, 2023, Cenci was indicted by the Richmond County District Attorney’s Office on two counts of Grand Larceny in the Second Degree, two counts of Tampering with Public Records in the First Degree, two counts of Falsifying Business Records in the First Degree, 11 counts of Grand Larceny in the Fourth Degree, and one count of Forgery in the Third Degree. She was arrested on January 4, 2024.

² Cosentino was not reassigned during this investigation. He does not, at present, have a problem code assigned to his personnel file.

I. Investigation & Findings:

A. Initial Allegations

The office of the Special Commissioner of Investigation for the New York City School District (“SCI”) received a complaint on April 4, 2023, from MEEPS Principal Cosentino, reporting MEEPS School Secretary Cenci for misconduct. Cosentino stated that he and [REDACTED], were signatories on the school’s checking account, and [REDACTED] informed him that she noticed that checks bearing their signatures were written without their knowledge. Cosentino added that [REDACTED] gave him school bank statements which documented checks that were made out to Cenci that Cosentino had never authorized.³

Investigators interviewed [REDACTED] on June 20, 2023, and found her statements consistent with those she made to OSI in an interview on June 8, 2023. [REDACTED] maintained that she never permitted Cenci to sign her name on any checks written from the MEEPS J.P. Morgan Chase Bank (“Chase”) checking account (on which she was a second signature) – including 24 checks which totaled \$17,244.21. She clarified that Cenci oversaw purchasing and the maintenance of financial records for the school’s account.

B. MEEPS Financial Records

On June 16, 2023, the DOE Office of Special Investigations (“OSI”) provided investigators with MEEPS Chase bank account statements from September 2021 through June 2022, and from September 2022 through March 2023.

Then, during [REDACTED] interview with SCI investigators on June 21st, she turned over MEEPS’s checking account ledger and receipt log from 2021 to 2023. In August 2023, Cosentino provided investigators with MEEPS’s receipt log from 2016 to 2022, Request for Expenditure forms, and MEEPS’s checking account ledger for checks written to Cenci that date back to 2016.

Subsequently, on June 27, 2023 and July 6, 2023, investigators obtained all statements, checks, and checking account information for MEEPS’s bank account for January 1, 2018 through December 31, 2021, and April 2021 through June 2023, from [REDACTED]. With these records, [REDACTED] provided confirmation that the authorized signor on the account from 2015 until 2023, was Cosentino. As of March 24, 2023, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] were also listed as signors. Cenci, according to [REDACTED] received statements, canceled checks, and other documents pertaining to the school’s Chase Bank account via email. Investigators conducted reviews of all bank account information from accounts on which Cenci was a signor.

³ Originally, SCI referred these allegations to the Office of Special Investigations (“OSI”), however, on June 13, 2023, the case was recalled from OSI and reclassified to an investigation.

Investigators reviewed MEEPS's checking account ledger from 2021 to 2023, and MEEPS's receipt log, and they found that from November 2021 through March 2023, Cenci wrote checks to herself totaling \$20,016.14. Investigators then compared MEEP's Request for Expenditure Forms and receipts pertaining to these checks to verify that the checks were written to Cenci legitimately, in furtherance of activities pertaining to the school.

After reviewing these receipts, investigators interviewed the payees of the checks that Cenci was able to provide documentation for, beginning with [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] told investigators that this was [REDACTED] first year working with MEEPS, and [REDACTED] was initially paid \$2,100 for the school's 2023 yearbook through a purchase order ("PO"). Thereafter, MEEPS made additional changes to the yearbook, totaling \$112.50, and paid via check. [REDACTED] then reviewed her banking account ledger, and informed investigators that her company was never paid \$800 by MEEPS check #2541. Rather, the check they received from MEEPS was check #2559, which [REDACTED] copied and provided to investigators.⁴

[REDACTED] also spoke with investigators. During [REDACTED] interview, investigators showed her a receipt from [REDACTED] order #S039537 for customer #C7244, which was dated January 24, 2023; written on this receipt was a note stating, "Additional 21 Shirts \$800." [REDACTED] confirmed that customer #C7244 was MEEPS, and order #S039537 was for 80 shirts, which cost a total of \$648. [REDACTED] stated that the note on the receipt was misleading – there was not an additional order of 21 shirts for \$800 placed with [REDACTED]. Per [REDACTED] [REDACTED] was paid by DOE purchase order #WO230050476. As with [REDACTED], MEEPS's checking account ledger and receipt log recorded a check written out to [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] confirmed, however, that [REDACTED] was never paid by MEEPS check #2540 as documented by the school's records.

Investigators then interviewed [REDACTED] who verified that his company supplied ice cream to MEEPS for various school events. He stated that he was normally paid through a DOE purchase order but had, on occasion, been paid via check from MEEPS. After comparing his records with receipts investigators collected from Cenci, and checks from MEEPS's Chase Bank account, [REDACTED] confirmed that nine checks on which the checking account ledger denoted [REDACTED] were not actually paid to his business. On one other date, a check was written out to Cenci, and the memo read, "Pizza for Kids and Staff" – [REDACTED] did not receive this check, or payment in this amount. [REDACTED] provided investigators with a report detailing all the payments made to his company from the DOE from June 21, 2021 through May 25, 2023. Investigators reviewed these payments, and they found that no payments he received matched the amounts paid in the ten aforementioned checks.

Subsequently, on June 28, 2023, investigators identified additional checks written to Cenci during their review of MEEPS bank account information – of the 39 checks identified, only two had verifiable receipts. Thirty-seven checks, totaling \$22,821.53, had no receipts and, therefore, appeared to be fraudulently written to "Michele Cenci." Investigators also found a consistent pattern whereby Cenci

⁴ [REDACTED] also provided investigators with copies of PO #WO230024780 and [REDACTED] Invoice #710932.

tampered with the school's check ledger to conceal her misconduct. Bank records showed there were 76 checks written to Cenci, however, MEEPS check ledger recorded eleven checks written to Cenci. All 65 other checks documented in the check ledger were to various vendors.

In August 2023, investigators obtained Cenci and her husband's bank count information from September 1, 2016, until the present, to review and identify any additional checks deposited into their accounts that were not reflected in MEEPS's financial records.

C. Interview with Principal Anthony Cosentino

When investigators interviewed Principal Cosentino on July 26, 2023, he confirmed that during his tenure as MEEPS principal, Cenci had served as the school's pupil accounting and purchasing secretary. The latter role also made Cenci the de facto treasurer for the school's General School Fund ("GSF"). According to Cosentino, Cenci was responsible for processing Small Item Payment Purchase ("SIPP") forms into the DOE's Financial Accounting Management Information System ("FAMIS") and paying the school's small bills through the GSF Chase Bank account. To investigators, Cosentino acknowledged his own responsibility, as a principal, to review the GSF account and SIPP purchases for accuracy. Cosentino recognized that it was his role as principal to ensure that purchases met the DOE guidelines, one of which included the requirement that checks written from GSF include two signatures, however, Cosentino admitted that since starting at MEEPS, he had not reviewed the GSF or SIPPs. He asserted that he trusted Cenci and, therefore, he let her operate and fulfil her accounting and purchasing responsibilities without his supervision.

At the beginning of his tenure as MEEPS principal, Cosentino provided Cenci with a stamp of his signature. She then used this stamp to sign checks from the GSF and sign-off on SIPPs requested by vendors and staff. In addition to this stamp, Cosentino also provided Cenci with his computer password for FAMIS so that she could process and approve SIPPs in his name. Cosentino maintained that he trusted Cenci to use his code correctly, and he was unaware that Cenci wrote checks to herself from the GSF account. He stated that because he gave Cenci the stamp of his signature, his FAMIS password to process and approve payments, and he never reviewed the GSF account himself, he did not knowingly approve of Cenci writing checks to herself. He simply never noticed Cenci engaging in this financial misconduct. Cosentino maintained his own ignorance and innocence.⁵

Cosentino also denied any knowledge that Cenci had processed SIPPs in the names of her family members. He identified [REDACTED], as Michele Cenci's husband, and [REDACTED]

⁵ Investigators reviewed DOE financial polices with Cosentino, beginning with alerting him that a stamp of signature was against DOE guidelines and was to be destroyed immediately. Cosentino was then told that he must review all GSF bank statements and checks written from the account to ensure the accuracy of the account and legitimacy of the checks written. He was also told to change any computer passwords he shared with staff, and to refrain from doing so in the future. Investigators advised Cosentino that he must review, sign, and approve any SIPP request going forward, and never delegate this responsibility to another MEEPS staff member. At the end of his interview, Cosentino again denied his involvement with Cenci's misconduct, stating that he never received any financial benefits from Cenci.

██████████ as her adult children. Other than Cenci herself, no other member of her family was employed by the DOE.

D. SIPP Review

As Cosentino revealed that Cenci also processed SIPPs, without supervision from another MEEPS administrator, investigators obtained documents pertaining to SIPPs from the DOE Division of Contracts and Purchasing (“DCP”). ██████████

██████████ sent investigators a report, which contained all information regarding SIPPs submitted and processed for MEEPS from 2004 to the 2023, and SIPP forms and associated receipts from 2017 to 2023. Investigators determined \$65,847.77 in SIPPs paid to various MEEPS personnel and their family members were potentially fraudulent and required further review. From September 2023 through October 2023, investigators conducted interviews with MEEPS personnel.

Investigators interviewed the owner of ██████████, who confirmed that the last time MEEPS ordered from her business was in 2017. After reviewing the SIPP receipts, she confirmed that five were fraudulent.⁶

The billing secretary for ██████████ also met with investigators and reviewed two MEEPS SIPPs, with receipts supposedly provided by ██████████.⁷ She confirmed that one SIPP form and receipt was legitimate, however, she stated that the receipt associated with the other SIPP form appeared to be a photocopy, and not a receipt Pioneer provided. She added that a trip for July 18, 2019 – the date listed on the dubious SIPP request form – was not booked by MEEPS and ██████████ did not provide services to the school on this date.

The owner of ██████████ recalled doing business with MEEPS and told investigators that he was usually paid via check. Investigators then showed ██████████ a list of SIPPs, and he responded that some receipts were duplicated with the same invoice number. Other receipts appeared altered with White-Out, and he ultimately concluded they were fictitious. ██████████ explained to investigators that each time a receipt was issued, he was provided with a different invoice.

Investigators also interviewed MEEPS teachers whose names appeared on SIPPs, beginning with ██████████. When investigators showed ██████████ three checks and their associated SIPPs, she denied any knowledge of these SIPPs or checks.⁸ She asserted that she never submitted for reimbursement for these SIPPs. She added that neither the signature on the checks nor the address belonged to her. ██████████ maintained that she never authorized Cenci to process SIPP requests in her name, nor did she authorize Cenci to deposit checks, with her name on them, into Cenci’s personal bank account.

⁶ The following SIPP receipts were deemed fraudulent by ██████████: #W1200044846, #W12000043977, #W1210002872, #W1170092565, and #W1170091538.

⁷ The representative from ██████████ confirmed that #W1190045443 was real, and #W120000742 was fake.

⁸ Investigators showed ██████████ check #146672 associated with SIPP #W1200059578, check #14360 associated with SIPP #W1200054978, and check #148302 associated with SIPP #W1200060565.

Similarly, when ██████████ reviewed a check, and its associated SIPP form, possessing her signature, and denied that it was her signature.⁹ She recognized the receipt attached to the check and SIPP form for an arts enrichment program at ██████████ but explained that the vendor was paid directly, and she did not submit the SIPP for personal reimbursement. ██████████ maintained that, prior to her SCI interview, she never saw either the check or the SIPP form. She further denied ever giving Cenci permission to process SIPPs in her name, or deposit checks in her name into Cenci's personal bank account. Furthermore, ██████████ was on maternity leave when the SIPP bearing her signature was created on January 2, 2020, corroborating her statements of ignorance.

██████████, also reviewed SIPP forms and checks with their names and signatures attached. All four teachers and ██████████ denied giving Cenci permission to submit SIPPs on their behalf, or deposit checks in their names. None recognized receipts that investigators showed them, and all three attested that the signatures on the checks did not belong to them. Furthermore, the address listed on the checks was not known to any of these women. In total, 21 SIPPs were submitted in these five women's names, none of which they deemed legitimate.¹⁰

Several weeks later, investigators spoke to ██████████ ██████████ ██████████, and all three women denied giving Cenci permission to submit SIPPs in their names, or deposit checks into Cenci's bank account that were written to them. None of these three women recognized the address on the checks, or the signatures.

Of the DOE employees whom Cenci submitted SIPPs on behalf of, only ██████████ ██████████ recognized the address on the check which investigators showed.¹¹ ██████████ denied giving Cenci permission to process SIPPs, or to cash checks that were written in her name, and she maintained that the signature on the check was not hers, however, she informed investigators that the address noted on the checks was Cenci's home address.

II. Conclusion & Recommendation:

SCI's investigation into Cenci revealed that from 2017 until 2023, School Secretary Michele Cenci stole \$145,060.11 from the DOE by writing 126 checks, made out to herself, for a total of \$88,932.62, and creating 257 SIPPs, totaling \$56,127.49. Cenci forged official documents to make it appear as if vendors were paid when, in actuality, checks from MEEPS's bank account were written to her and deposited into her personal accounts. Furthermore, she created fraudulent SIPP requests in her maiden name, family members' names – who were not DOE employees or vendors – as well as the MEEPS parents' names and

⁹ MEEPS check #104497 and SIPP #WI200024116 were shown to ██████████

¹⁰ ██████████ was shown SIPPs #WI200056992, #WI200055348, and #WI210005620, which were all written in her name. ██████████ reviewed SIPPs #WI200061492 and #WI210018489, which bore her name. Investigators showed ██████████ SIPP #WI200067323, and ██████████ SIPPs #WI20000700, #WI200011471, #WI200009133, #WI210002503, #WI200009174, #WI20043977, #WI200013811. ██████████ viewed SIPP #WI210003843, #WI200014387, #WI20017246, #WI210004526, #WI190016357, #WI20006976, #WI200016115, #WI10004086, #WI210004674, #WI210006085, #WI190017190.

¹¹ Investigators showed ██████████ check #005039640, and a SIPP ending in #0039473.

12 members of MEEPS's staff. She then used these forged SIPPs to seek reimbursement, and deposited all money received from reimbursement into her personal accounts. Cenci was able to continuously steal from MEEPS partly because MEEPS Principal Anthony Cosentino blatantly disregarded Chancellor's Regulations and DOE DCP rules. Despite an audit revealing financial discrepancies, Cosentino failed to take corrective action. He admitted that he had a conversation with Cenci regarding the audit's findings but did not restrict her access to his passwords to DOE financial systems and the stamp of his signature to use on checks and other financial documents.

Therefore, we recommend that the DOE terminate Michele's Cenci's employment, and ensure that the problem code presently assigned to her personnel remain in place should she seek future employment with the DOE, within any of its facilities, or with any of its vendors. Additionally, the DOE should seek repayment from Cenci for any and all monies she received through fraudulent checks and forged documents, at a minimum, the \$145,060.11 identified herein. Cosentino should be subject to strong disciplinary action, up to and including termination of his employment. At minimum, he should be required to undergo re-training in DOE DCP rules and financial recordkeeping.

Please respond in writing within 30 days of receipt of this letter as to any action taken regarding Michele Cenci, Anthony Cosentino, and the recommendations made herein. We are sending a copy of this letter to the DOE Office of Legal Services. We are also sending a copy of this letter to the New York State Education Department, for whatever action they deem appropriate. Should you have any inquiries regarding the above, please contact me at (212) 510-1418 or DSchlachet@nycsci.org.

Sincerely,

ANASTASIA COLEMAN
Special Commissioner of Investigation
for the New York City School District

By: /s/ Daniel I. Schlachet
Daniel I. Schlachet
First Deputy Commissioner

AC:DS:cl

cc: Elizabeth Vladeck, Esq.
Karen Antoine, Esq.
Katherine Rodi, Esq.
Monica Davis-Thorne, Director