

Investigation of Whistleblower Claim
Re: Georgia Appleseed Crime Prevention Grant

February 26, 2019

Complaint

On September 11, 2018, Complainant appeared before City Council on the Public Agenda to address the Crime Prevention Grant awarded to Columbus Georgia Field Office of Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice. The complaint questioned the effectiveness of their PBIS activity to prevent the school to prison pipeline.

In the early years of the grant, Georgia Appleseed focused its efforts on providing technical assistance to the Juvenile Court in the Implementation of a Cooperative Agreement between the court, school system and law enforcement and a New Juvenile Code in an effort to dismantle the "School to Prison Pipeline" and Build the "School to Opportunity Pipeline. The organization later provided the Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) training to educators and administrators to help them better identify "at-risk" students and reduce or eliminate Out-of-School Suspensions whenever possible. Also questioned was the effectiveness of the program to achieve positive results. There was also a suggestion that organizations based elsewhere receiving local crime prevention grants, the funding might be used in other communities. It was also implies that the local Director spent much of his time "on the road," and that he eventually resigned due to the extensive travel requirements.

On January 22, the Complainant returned to City Council on the public agenda, reiterating earlier points and describing the Georgia Appleseed

grant award as being incestuous as the husband of former Mayor Tomlinson served as a board member at the time of the grant award.

Request to Investigate as a Whistleblower Complaint

Mayor Tomlinson asked the Internal Auditors, who also investigate Whistleblower Complaints, to address this matter, treating it as a public whistleblower complaint.

Investigative Process

The auditors obtained copies of all related Crime Prevention Files of the Crime Prevention Director's Office and information provided by either the Muscogee County School District or the Complainant. The auditors also interviewed the Crime Prevention Director to obtain additional information and discern the nature of the complaint. We requested that he obtain additional information about Out-of-School Suspension for as many years possible, prior to the PBIS training, and any updates of results since that time. He provided his recollection of the PBIS training he attended and gave some insight as to why certain schools see different results than others. The school district was not forthcoming with additional information, so we worked with what we had, and analyzed the data in different ways.

One such way was to look at Out-of-School Suspensions by school category, of high school, middle school, and elementary school. We also compared the suspension rates of schools whose staff received PBIS

training in the first year versus those receiving it during the second year, versus those that were trained during both years. We also considered the changing dynamics in a school, aside from the PBIS training. For example, schools experience some turnover in educators and administrators from one year to the next. Likewise, the student population at a school changes in a more systemic manner. Elementary students may stay in a school for seven years, so without transfers or moving away, roughly one-seventh of its population leaves each year, and another one-seventh arrives. Middle school rotates one-third of its student population each, and high schools rotate one-fourth of theirs. The more the population changes each year, the more the need for identification of at-risk students becomes. Each of these issues can affect the outcome of the PBIS training in a school, but it assumes that the teachers and administrators are all supportive of the program to reduce Out-of-School suspensions.

Another factor that can affect the program outcome is the school's administration may not be supportive of the program due to conflicting objectives. School professionals are evaluated base on other measures of success, such as graduation rates, academic averages, pass-fail rates, attendance, achievement test scores, and grade level performance. In order to attain the best results, it is necessary for teachers to teach their subject matter as completely as possible, with minimal classroom disruption. At-risk students may pose a threat to success in these areas as they often have behavioral issues, or simply are functioning below grade level and require extra teaching or handling. In order to attain academic success, it may be easier for the teachers and administrators to remove these students from the classroom and send them home. With limited time and resources, staff focuses efforts on activities and individuals that yield the greatest return on investment.

Crime Prevention Program Grant

Georgia Appleseed Deliverables

For FY2017, the Crime Prevention Board issued a grant to Georgia Appleseed for \$88,000, of which \$78,000 was for personnel and \$10,000 was for supplies.

The grantee provided the grant application, and supplemental documents, as required by the grant contract. The grantee would submit monthly reports to the Crime Prevention Director. The grantee agreed to provide services to reduce expulsions/suspensions and increase the graduation rates.

Findings

Upon the recommendation of the Crime Prevention Board, the City executed a contractual agreement with Georgia Appleseed to provide services to the community to aid in reducing the Muscogee County School Districts' expulsion rate and increasing the graduation rate. The strategy to achieve these goals was through the provision of Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) training to educators and administrators, participation in Parent-Teacher Association meetings and other community meetings and activities to inform citizens and parents about the program.

Monthly reports indicated the schools selected for PBIS training and those participating, as directed by District Administrators. The reports also reflected numerous school and community meetings and activities that Mr. Reese, the key operative in Muscogee County, participated. While he may have attended meetings at organization's headquarters in Atlanta, Mr. Reese spent a substantial amount of his time "on the road" within his own community in Columbus.

The PBIS training was conducted during School Years 2016-2017 and 2017-2018. Some of the schools participated one year, and many attended during both of the years. Results were mixed between the two school years, with some increasing their Out-of-School suspensions, while others decreased. During that period, high schools decreased by 5.9%, while middle schools increased 9.2%, and elementary

schools increased 4.8%. Overall, suspensions increased by 2.4% during the two-year training period. On a school-by-school basis, some exhibited remarkable decreases, such as Midland Middle School from 53 to 4, while others experienced increases. In reality, there has not been enough time since the training occurred to evaluate the success or failure of the PBIS training.

Georgia Appleseed was significantly involved, statewide, in affecting a change to the Juvenile Justice System in Georgia during the time they have received crime-prevention funds in Columbus. These efforts have contributed to a fairer and equal system for juvenile offenders, through its intent to remove non-violent offences from the courtroom. Most parties involved in the system attribute benefit to the changes and are working toward further adjustments to the system. The entire state, including Muscogee County have benefitted from these changes.

A review of the participation of Mr. Tomlinson as a board member of Georgia Appleseed during the time that his wife served as Mayor of Columbus was not a conflict of interest, as neither received any financial benefit from their respective roles, nor did the Mayor have any direct involvement in the award of Crime Prevention Grants. The City Attorney concurred with this determination.

It is the opinion of the auditor that Georgia Appleseed fulfilled its obligations under the grants, as did the City of Columbus.



Internal Auditor & Compliance Officer



Date