



# OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

Montgomery County, Maryland



## MEMORANDUM OF INVESTIGATION

**TO:** Dr. Monifa McKnight  
Superintendent

**FROM:** Megan Davey Limarzi, Esq. *ML*  
Inspector General

**DATE:** November 29, 2023

**SUBJECT:** Investigation of Misconduct Allegations Against Dr. Joel Beidleman

The Montgomery County Office of the Inspector General (OIG) has completed an investigation related to allegations that Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) employee Dr. Joel Beidleman (Beidleman) engaged in misconduct while serving as the principal of Farquhar Middle School. In conducting this investigation, the OIG evaluated each complaint, attempted to corroborate the information provided to the extent possible, and in instances where no witnesses outside of the reporting and offending parties existed, evaluated the allegation against the totality of the information available.

The investigation substantiated allegations that Beidleman made repeated comments about the appearance of female subordinates, directed offensive comments and jokes of a sexual nature at subordinates, bullied subordinates, and had a sexual relationship with a subordinate over which he had supervisory responsibility. Beidleman's behavior created an environment where some staff members reported being afraid to disagree with him on professional matters, worried about their job security, and felt intimidated and disrespected. Beidleman's conduct violated MCPS's sexual harassment and workplace bullying policies, and MCPS's Employee Code of Conduct (Code of Conduct).

### **BACKGROUND**

On August 11, 2023, the Washington Post published an article reporting that MCPS promoted Beidleman to the position of Principal of Paint Branch High School despite receiving many complaints against him. The article cited claims from current and former employees that they had been subjected to sexual harassment, bullying, and retaliation while working under Beidleman at Farquhar Middle School and two other MCPS schools.

In response to the allegations presented in the article, the Montgomery County Board of Education (BOE) hired law firm Jackson Lewis, P.C. to investigate Beidleman's promotion. At the conclusion of Jackson Lewis's investigation, the OIG initiated two engagements related to allegations against Beidleman and MCPS's handling of misconduct complaints. This investigation addresses all allegations of misconduct against Beidleman that have been received since July 2023 and any previous allegations that the OIG determined were not yet investigated.

The OIG analyzed data from several complaint intake sources and found that MCPS received 17 complaints related to Beidleman's conduct prior to the publication of the Washington Post article. Additionally, MCPS received six complaints related to Beidleman subsequent to the article and prior to the OIG initiating its investigation. Those complaints alleged, among other things, acts of bullying, retaliation, sexual harassment, and unfair hiring practices.

In an effort to identify all potential victims and those willing to provide information to further the OIG's investigation, the OIG sent an email to all 83 Farquhar Middle School teachers and staff, had a forensic examination of Beidleman's MCPS-issued computers done, added OIG contact information to MCPS's website, and requested that the Washington Post reporters who authored the original article provide the OIG's contact information to those who contributed to the reporting. The OIG received 54 MCPS-related complaints since initiating its investigation, 10 of which were related to misconduct by Beidleman. Many of the complaints alleged general incompetence by MCPS leadership or expressed concern about what was reported in the Washington Post article. Several complaints reviewed by the OIG were duplicates and described events that were previously submitted. Some complainants also informed the OIG that they had submitted the same complaint numerous times through different reporting vehicles.

The OIG interviewed 31 individuals who had information directly related to Beidleman's alleged misconduct, 15 of those claimed to be victims of sexual harassment, bullying, retaliation, or other violations of MCPS's Code of Conduct, as well as potential violations of federal and local laws.

## **INVESTIGATIVE FINDINGS**

Through interviews with the complainants and witnesses who cooperated with the OIG's investigation, it is clear that Beidleman was a divisive figure who some staff members described as abusive while others considered him a mentor and innovative leader. Many of those that cooperated with the investigation provided examples of instances where Beidleman yelled, screamed, and berated them, or otherwise behaved in an unprofessional manner, to include retaliating against them. Current and former staff members also provided examples of occasions where Beidleman commented on female staff members' appearances, made remarks of a sexual nature to female subordinates, and pursued MCPS employees for sex.

### Bullying and Retaliation of MCPS Employees

A majority of the complaints and people interviewed by the OIG reported that Beidleman exhibited bullying behavior. MCPS's *Employee Code of Conduct* prohibits employees from bullying, harassing or intimidating MCPS employees. It further requires that employees "treat all colleagues... fairly, equitably, and with respect," and not engage in conduct that is rude or disrespectful.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2022-2023 Employee Code of Conduct, pg. 5, Ethical Conduct with Colleagues, Parents/Guardians, and the Community.

MCPS's Workplace Bullying (ACH-RA) regulation defines workplace bullying as follows:<sup>2</sup>

“... repeated, deliberate, hurtful mistreatment, either direct or indirect, whether verbal, physical, or otherwise, conducted by one or more employees against another employee or employees and that is:

1. Motivated by any individual's actual or perceived personal characteristics as defined in Board of Education Policy ACA, *Nondiscrimination, Equity, and Cultural Proficiency*; or
2. Threatening or intimidating; and that occurs at the workplace and or in the course of employment; and
3. Sufficiently severe or pervasive so as to alter the conditions of the individual's working environment.

These behaviors may occur in person or via any means of communication, including electronic communication, whether the conduct or communication occurs on or off MCPS property.

Examples of workplace bullying may include acts of humiliation, intimidation, or sabotage of work performance. Workplace bullying may adversely impact an individual's physical or psychological well-being, or work performance and advancement opportunities.”

Eleven separate employees reported being bullied by Beidleman, some as far back as 2018. They reported that he yelled and screamed at staff and created a culture where staff were afraid to voice their professional disagreement with him and felt threatened with the loss of their positions. One employee provided Beidleman publicly shamed and embarrassed them in front of other employees. Another employee reported that Beidleman made verbally intimidating statements advising the employee that they were “untrustworthy”, made decisions they “will later regret”, and to “watch out.” Still another reported that in December of 2022, Beidleman “yelled” at them stating, “get your shit together or you are not going to be here.” One employee succinctly captured the persistent fear of bullying expressed by many complainants when she stated that she “learned real quick to lay low or risk public shaming.”

One Farquhar teacher provided the OIG with documentation showing that on the same day Beidleman disagreed with her on a curriculum issue, Beidleman served her with notification that she was being involuntarily transferred because her position for the following school year was being “reduced” resulting “from changes in student enrollment, programs, and budget.” After the employee challenged the seemingly punitive nature of the transfer, Beidleman did not pursue it further.

MCPS's *Transfer or Reassignment of Teachers* (GFB-RB) policy refers readers to the contract between the Montgomery County Education Association and the BOE for the conditions under which a teacher may be transferred. Article 26 of the contract addresses involuntary transfers but does not allow them for “arbitrary, retaliatory, or capricious reasons.” The fact that Beidleman

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<sup>2</sup> Workplace Bullying (ACH), pg. 1, III. Definitions, C.

rescinded the transfer days after notifying the employee of her transfer is indicative of his intent to transfer the employee as retaliation for disagreeing with him and not because of a change in enrollment, program, or budget. Eight other employees expressed feeling intimidated when Beidleman acted out against them for disagreeing with him or acting contrary to his expectations. For example, two employees reported that Beidleman repeatedly called them while they were on approved leave if he deemed their absence unnecessary or excessive.

The complainants' experiences left them feeling anxious, afraid, stressed, intimidated, disrespected, and worried about their job security. Beidleman's pervasive, repeated, deliberate, and hurtful mistreatment of subordinates altered the conditions of his subordinate's working environment, a violation of MCPS's Code of Conduct and workplace bullying policy.

### Sexual Harassment of MCPS Employees

As noted previously, the OIG reviewed and investigated several allegations of sexual harassment and reports of offensive conduct by Beidleman. These types of allegations are challenging to investigate as they are fact and circumstance specific; can be interpreted by or affect individuals in unique ways; and often involve comments, conversations, and exchanges that purposely do not take place around witnesses.

MCPS's policy *Sexual Harassment of MCPS Employees (ACI)* prohibits sexual harassment on MCPS property, which includes "circumstances over which MCPS exercises substantial control over the individuals involved and the context in which alleged harassment occurred."<sup>3</sup> The policy explains that "In determining whether alleged conduct constitutes sexual harassment, MCPS will look at the record as a whole and at the totality of the circumstances, including the type and frequency of the conduct, the context in which the alleged incidents occurred, the severity of the conduct, whether it is physically threatening or humiliating or merely an offensive act or utterance."<sup>4</sup> The policy defines offensive conduct to "include, but is not limited to, offensive jokes, slurs, epithets or name calling, physical assaults or threats, intimidation, ridicule or mockery, insults or put-downs, offensive objects or pictures, and interference with work or school performance."<sup>5</sup>

One complainant who was an MCPS employee but not Beidleman's subordinate alleged that Beidleman sent her numerous text messages containing sexually offensive comments while attempting to pursue a sexual relationship with her after she expressed interest in applying for an assistant principal position at Farquhar. Assistant principal positions are filled using a two-step process. First, the aspiring candidate must be selected into a position pool, which involves submitting a comprehensive packet and application, and participating in an interview. If selected for the pool, the candidate can be placed into a vacant position or go through a hiring process involving additional interviews. The complainant was applying for selection into the assistant principal pool during the text exchanges with Beidleman and explicitly told him early in their text exchange that she wanted to work as an assistant principal for him at Farquhar. It does not appear that Beidleman was directly involved in the interview or selection process for pool

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<sup>3</sup> Sexual Harassment of MCPS Employees policy (ACI), pg. 1, Section B, Issue, subpart 1.

<sup>4</sup> Sexual Harassment of MCPS Employees policy (ACI), pg. 4, Section B, Issue, subpart 6.

<sup>5</sup> Sexual Harassment of MCPS Employees policy (ACI), pg. 4, Section B, Issue, subpart 7(a).

candidates, but Beidleman made comments to the complainant that led her to believe he could exert influence in the process.

Through text messages provided to the OIG by the complainant spanning roughly three months. Beidleman used the illusion of favorably influencing the individual's chances of being selected for an assistant principal position at Farquhar in exchange for tolerating his repetitive unwanted sexual advances. In one exchange Beidleman told her that the position was hers if she wanted it. In a later exchange, Beidleman complained about MCPS assigning someone else to the vacant assistant principal position at Farquhar, but said, "fingers crossed she applies for a virtual position and gets it. Then boom bam boom I have my crush at work." The individual repeatedly told Beidleman that she was not interested in a sexual relationship and only wanted to remain friends, but he nevertheless persisted by sending sexually explicit texts. Beidleman described to the OIG his text messages with the complainant as "sexting." The complainant told the OIG that she believes she may have been subsequently not selected for the pool because she would not submit to Beidleman's advances.

Many of the text messages written by Beidleman to the complainant were sent during the day, when MCPS was in session and at times when he was expected to be working. In one exchange he instructs the complainant to call him "when you finish period 8" and in another he talks about going to a local bar after work. The text messages appear to have been sent from Beidleman's personal cell phone and not his assigned MCPS cell phone.

Beidleman's conduct as it pertains to this complainant appears to violate MCPS's sexual harassment policy in that he subjected the complainant to repeated unwelcome sexual advances and verbal conduct of a sexual nature while on MCPS property and in connection with circumstances over which MCPS exercised substantial control. He implicitly conditioned the complainant's promotion on submission to those sexual advances. His conduct appears to violate MCPS's Code of Conduct admonition to "conduct your private life activities (including social media activities) in a manner that is not prejudicial to your effectiveness as an MCPS employee and recognize that criminal, dishonest, and other inappropriate activities may have an adverse impact on your employment with MCPS."<sup>6</sup>

An additional complainant recounted a time when she encountered Beidleman at Farquhar and he stated, "Ooheeee look at [complainant's name], look at [complainant's name]. Wow girl, you lost weight. Look at you. Give it a turn, let me check out the backside." The complainant recalled that she responded "NO!" and Beidleman appeared to think it was funny. The complainant said the encounter made her feel "so gross and so disgusted, and I felt so powerless" especially knowing he was objectifying her when she turned to walk away. The complainant further provided that Beidleman always "talked to our breasts" and stated that she couldn't remember a day when Beidleman "didn't check out [her] breasts." The complainant informed OIG staff that she adopted certain behaviors to avoid Beidleman's unwanted attention. Believing Beidleman preferred women with blond hair, she "went brunette." She also believes she subconsciously put on weight to discourage his interest.

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<sup>6</sup> 2022-2023 Employee Code of Conduct, pg. 3, Ethical Conduct in the Work Environment.

The OIG heard a similar account from another of his subordinates who reported she changed her appearance to avoid attention and sexualized comments from Beidleman. She reported that after Beidleman told her that “I didn’t know I hired a Brazilian woman with long legs,” she was very embarrassed and never wore shorts to the school again. She also ceased wearing makeup and began dressing in a way to avoid being noticed by him. He nonetheless continued to comment on her appearance.

Beidleman’s conduct as it pertains to these complainants appears to violate MCPS’s sexual harassment policy in that he subjected the complainants to verbal comments of a sexual nature that unreasonably affected their work performance and created an offensive work environment.

Some of those who cooperated with the investigation also reported that Beidleman made sexually offensive comments directed to subordinate staff members at events outside of the school environment. It was reported to the OIG that Beidleman made sexually offensive comments to a female subordinate while attending a 2021 end of school year party hosted at the home of another subordinate employee. The female subordinate told the OIG that Beidleman approached her and essentially asked if she and her husband engaged in anal sex. The subordinate stated that Beidleman continued by making comments about the size of her posterior, whether or not her husband was in the “back door” and whether or not she thought it was uncomfortable. The offending comments were made in the presence of another Farquhar employee who confirmed to the OIG that they heard Beidleman make the comments. The recipient employee described the incident as “gross” and “uncomfortable.” MCPS’s sexual harassment policy requires that the offending conduct take place on MCPS property or in circumstances where MCPS exercises substantial control over the individuals involved. The gathering was not on MCPS property or in a location where MCPS exercised substantial control over the attendees. Furthermore, the OIG was not able to assess the impact on the employee’s work environment.

Similarly, while attending a social gathering in 2020 at the home of another staff member Beidleman also made offensive comments in the presence of subordinates. Unbeknownst to those in attendance, Beidleman and the subordinate staff member to whom he directed the comments had, according to her, been involved in a sexual relationship. Notwithstanding their relationship, MCPS’s sexual harassment policy requires that the offending conduct take place on MCPS property or in circumstances where MCPS exercises substantial control over the individuals involved. The gathering was not on MCPS property or in a location where MCPS exercised substantial control over the attendees. This conduct was previously partially investigated by MCPS, and a letter of reprimand was issued to Beidleman citing a violation of the Code of Conduct.

This same complainant alleged that after the relationship ended, Beidleman continued to pursue her, and when she would not engage with him, he bullied her, and retaliated against her by making her reapply for a position that she already held. The OIG concluded that Beidleman did not single out the employee by making her reapply for a position that she already held. The facts show that Beidleman, as a result of his interpretation of the middle school reform initiative, made every employee holding a similar position as the complainant reapply for their role. However, the other examples cited by the complainant were consistent with the bullying behavior exhibited by Beidleman toward other staff and discussed in the previous section of this report.

The OIG could not validate claims that Beidleman continued to pursue the complainant after their relationship ended. The complainant provided the OIG with one text message reportedly sent to her from Beidleman in which he asks her to meet him at a hotel. However, because investigators were not provided with the complete text exchange between Beidleman and the complainant, the OIG was not able to discern the context in which it was said or establish that it was sent after the relationship ended.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, the OIG further assessed other claims of Beidleman commenting on the appearance of female staff members and making remarks of a sexual nature to female subordinates against MCPS's sexual harassment policy. In so doing, the OIG considered multiple claims that Beidleman "looked [female employees] up and down," told another female staffer that she "looked good," dedicated a sexually themed song to a subordinate at a school event, and commented on their appearance in a way that subordinates felt was inappropriate. The reported comments and conduct seem to be consistent with the more specific allegations addressed above, but the OIG was not able to validate them or assess their direct impact on recipients' work environment.

#### Financial Improprieties

The OIG investigated allegations that Beidleman may have engaged in unspecified financial improprieties with MCPS funds while serving as principal of Farquhar Middle School. In discussions with MCPS's internal auditor and reviews of applicable documents, the OIG observed that in 2017 and 2018, Beidleman attempted to obtain reimbursements for travel expenses that were ultimately denied by MCPS financial staff. In 2017, Beidleman was reimbursed for a hotel room he reserved in connection with a Farquhar leadership team development event. The expense was later determined by MCPS's internal audit unit to not be in compliance with MCPS policy, however they did not require him to repay the funds.

In 2018, Beidleman was reimbursed approximately \$332 for hotel room expenses associated with a trip to Tennessee to meet with the school band. The expense was also later determined to be inconsistent with MCPS policy and Beidleman was made to refund MCPS for the questioned amount.

The OIG determined that these allegations of improper financial transactions were previously addressed by MCPS.

#### Code of Conduct Violation

The OIG learned through interviews with one of Beidleman's subordinates that they had a personal relationship that included sex on approximately three occasions. The subordinate provided she and Beidleman "shared things about their personal life," met for drinks on multiple occasions, and gave each other rides to take care of personal matters.

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<sup>7</sup> The complainant reported experiencing issues with her cell phone account that prevented her from retrieving all of the related text messages.

When interviewed by the OIG on two separate occasions Beidleman denied a romantic or sexual relationship with the employee. Beidleman admitted to socializing with the subordinate outside of work but denied any sexual involvement. Beidleman provided the OIG with a picture sent to him via text by the subordinate that shows her legs as she is laying in a bathtub. Beidleman provided the picture to argue that he did not sexually harass the employee because she sent him a suggestive photograph. The subordinate employee verified she sent him the picture while they were engaged in a relationship.

The OIG reviewed texts sent by Beidleman to the subordinate employee that refers to the subordinate as “love” and includes a link to the romantically themed song “Borderline” by Madonna with instructions for her to listen to it. The OIG also saw one text where Beidleman tells the subordinate to “come be with me” at a hotel.

It is apparent through the text exchanges and the subordinate’s statements to the OIG that Beidleman was involved in what could be categorized as a sexual and/or romantic relationship with a subordinate.

### **Conclusion**

This investigation substantiated violations of MCPS’s Code of Conduct, and sexual harassment and workplace bullying policies. I am referring this matter to you for appropriate action.

Please contact me with any questions.