

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF  
PALM BEACH COUNTY, FLORIDA

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## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Honorable Chair and Members of the School Board  
Michael J. Burke, Superintendent  
Chair and Members of the Audit Committee

**FROM:** Teresa Michael, Inspector General *TJM*

**DATE:** March 6, 2024

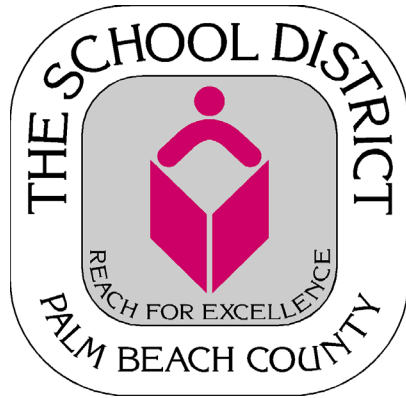
**SUBJECT:** Transmittal of Final Investigative Report:  
*24-0001-I Pine Jog Elementary School*

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Attached please find a copy of the Palm Beach County School District Office of Inspector General (OIG) Whistle-Blower Final Report of OIG Case 24-0001-I related to an allegation of retaliation. The OIG reviewed and determined the allegation met the requirements for a Whistle-blower complaint in accordance with School Board Policy 3.28.

On June 6, 2023, the OIG received a complaint regarding alleged misconduct on the part of Pine Jog Elementary School Principal Tarachell Thomas. Specifically, it was alleged that Principal Thomas retaliated against the Whistle-blower because the WB made a legally mandated report involving a student to the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) in accordance with Florida Statute section 39.201.

The OIG investigation concluded that Principal Thomas did not take adverse personnel action or retaliate against the WB in violation of Florida Statute section 39.203 or School District Policy 3.28.7 because she made a report to DCF. As such the allegation was **Unsubstantiated**.



# **OIG CASE NUMBER 24-0001-I**

## ***Pine Jog Elementary School***

**TYPE OF REPORT: FINAL**

**DATE OF REPORT: November 27, 2023**



*Teresa Michael*

Teresa Michael, Inspector General  
Office of Inspector General  
School District of Palm Beach County

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# *Office of Inspector General*

## *Report of Investigation 24-0001-I*

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

From August 21, 2023 to November 03, 2023, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted interviews and reviewed pertinent documentation and records related to an allegation that Pine Jog Elementary School Principal Tarachell Thomas retaliated against Teacher Savannah Henry “WB” for making a legally mandated report to the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) in accordance with Florida Statute 39.201<sup>1</sup> in violation of Florida Statute section 39.203 and the District’s Whistle-blower Protection Policy (Policy 3.28).

The OIG reviewed and determined the allegation met the requirements for a Whistle-blower complaint in accordance with School Board Policy 3.28.

Specifically, it was alleged that Thomas retaliated against the WB by terminating their employment subsequent to the WB making a legally mandated report to DCF. The WB had a student that exhibited constant behavior issues, which included violent tendencies. The WB allegedly submitted numerous discipline referrals to administration throughout the school year (SY 2022/23) so administrators would provide appropriate assistance and resources for the student. Instead, the WB was allegedly singled out during some faculty and grade level meetings for submitting an excessive amount of discipline referrals. The WB was also allegedly instructed by Thomas to stop submitting referrals and to not submit reports to DCF.

The WB’s employment was terminated during their probationary period. According to Thomas, the WB failed to manage their classroom and did not demonstrate consistent improvement throughout the year. Additionally, the investigation revealed that weeks before the WB made the disclosure to DCF, Thomas discussed terminating the WB’s employment with HR and District-level administration based on their performance, including documented instances of the WB’s absences where a substitute teacher was not secured or lesson plans were not provided for the substitute teacher.

The OIG investigation concluded that Principal Thomas did not take adverse personnel action or retaliate against the WB in violation of Florida Statute section 39.203 or School District Policy 3.28.7 because they made a report to DCF. As such the allegation was **Unsubstantiated**.

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<sup>1</sup> Florida Statute section 39.201 mandates reporting child abuse, abandonment, or neglect, sexual abuse of a child, and juvenile sexual abuse.

## INVESTIGATIVE PREDICATE

On June 6, 2023, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) received a complaint regarding alleged misconduct on the part of Pine Jog Elementary School (PJES) Principal Tarachell Thomas. Specifically, it was alleged that Principal Thomas retaliated against the WB because the WB made a legally mandated report involving a student to the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) in accordance with Florida Statute section 39.201.

On July 3, 2023, OIG Investigator Veronica Vallecillo was assigned this complaint for investigation.

The OIG investigation concluded that the allegation was Unsubstantiated. The investigation findings of the allegation will be discussed in detail later in this report.

## BACKGROUND

PJES is a public school located at 6315 Summit Blvd., West Palm Beach, Florida. The student enrollment at PJES is approximately 800, serving grades K-5.

## ALLEGATION

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It is alleged that PJES Principal Tarachell Thomas violated Florida Statute section 39.203 and School Board Policy 3.28, Whistle-blower Protection Policy, by retaliating against the WB when she terminated their employment because the WB made a legally mandated report to DCF.

Florida law requires a person report immediately to the central abuse hotline if he or she knows, or has a reasonable cause to suspect child abuse, abandonment, or neglect. §39.201(1)(a)1.a, Fla. Stat.

Florida Statute section 39.203 provides individuals legal protections when reporting in good faith suspected instances of child abuse, abandonment, or neglect, stating in part,

*“No resident or employee of a facility serving children may be subjected to reprisal or discharge because of his or her actions in reporting abuse, abandonment, or neglect pursuant to the requirements of this section.*

*Any person making a report under this section shall have a civil cause of action for appropriate compensatory and punitive damages against any person who causes detrimental changes in the employment status of such reporting party by reason of his or her making such report. Any detrimental change made in the residency or employment status of such person, including, but not limited to, discharge,*

*termination, demotion, transfer, or reduction in pay or benefits or work privileges, or negative evaluations within a prescribed period of time shall establish a rebuttable presumption that such action was retaliatory.” Quoting §39.203(2)(a) - .203(2)(b), Fla. Stat.*

The Board’s Whistle-blower Protection Policy was created with the intent “to protect an employee who engages in good faith reporting from reprisal by adverse employment action or other retaliation as a result of having disclosed wrongful conduct, and to provide employees who believe they have been subject to reprisal or false allegations a fair process to seek relief from such acts.” Quoting Policy 3.28.1.

Additionally, Policy 3.28.7 protects against adverse personnel action or retaliation based on the reporting of a protected disclosure, stating,

*“This policy protects employees and other persons who disclose information on their own volition in a written and signed complaint with the Inspector General; who initiate a complaint through the Inspector General’s Hotline; who are requested to participate in an investigation, hearing or other inquiry conducted by the Superintendent, School Board, state agency or federal government; who refuse to participate in any adverse action prohibited by this policy; or, who file a written complaint to their supervisors.”*

Further, “If the employee’s allegations of adverse personnel action or retaliation are substantiated, appropriate corrective measures shall be taken by the Superintendent, Board or Department Head.” Quoting 3.28.7.a.

An employee who takes adverse personnel action or retaliates against someone who reported, in good faith, the actions of employees or independent contractors, is subject to discipline up to and including termination of employment. Policy 3.28.7.b

## **COMPLAINANT INTERVIEW**

**On June 15, 2023, a sworn recorded interview of the WB was conducted in Jupiter, FL. The following represents actual and paraphrased statements made by “The Whistle-blower (WB)” as they relate to the Allegation:**

The WB reported that since the inception of their employment at PJES, there was a student (Student 1) that exhibited constant behavior issues, which included violent tendencies. As a result, the WB submitted numerous discipline referrals to school administrators throughout the school year (2022/23) so that administrators would provide the appropriate assistance and resources for Student 1. Instead of providing the appropriate assistance and resources, the WB was singled out during faculty and grade level meetings for submitting an excessive amount of discipline referrals and was

instructed by Principal Thomas to terminate the submission of discipline referrals and to not submit reports to DCF.

On or about April 20, 2023, the WB discussed their concerns regarding Student 1's behavior with School Behavioral Health Professional Larisa Lagasse. The WB noted they had been in contact with Lagasse regarding Student 1 in the past. The WB explained that Lagasse believed there was abuse in Student 1's home. The WB said they were uncertain when or if Lagasse filed a report with DCF regarding Student 1.

Later, on April 20, 2023, Thomas scheduled a meeting with the WB and Student 1's parent. The WB reported that during the meeting, Thomas told Student 1's mother that Student 1 does not have any issues with any staff members or students, with the exception of the WB. The WB stated Thomas blamed Student 1's behavior issues on the WB. As a result of the meeting, Thomas allowed Student 1's mother to sit with Student 1 during class time at the end of April and beginning of May.

The WB said that while the mother sat in class with Student 1, several physical altercations between Student 1 and mother ensued. The WB stated it was around this time they began to suspect that Student 1 may have been abused. Subsequently, the WB told Thomas that Lagasse may have filed a report with DCF and let Thomas know that they would have to follow protocol in order to protect all of their students. During the conversation, the WB made it known to Thomas that they would have to make a report to DCF based on Student 1 harming others in the classroom. According to the WB, Thomas told the WB to not submit reports to DCF.

The WB stated that they and Lagasse submitted a report to DCF regarding Student 1, on April 20, 2023. On or about May 3, 2023, the WB submitted another report to DCF regarding Student 1. The WB stated that on or about May 4, 2023, they were interviewed at PJES by a DCF investigator. The WB believes that Thomas and Assistant Principal Christian Moreira knew about the report made to DCF and that led to their termination.

On May 12, 2023, Thomas called the WB into Thomas' conference room at which point Thomas terminated the WB. The WB asked Thomas if they could finish teaching the last two weeks of the school year and Thomas responded that their termination was effective that day. The WB proceeded to ask Thomas why they were being terminated and Thomas did not give them a reason.

The WB explained they had Student 1 in their class, who had ongoing behavior issues that included hitting, kicking, and pushing other students and the WB. The WB first reported Student 1's violent behavior to administration on December 20, 2022, via a discipline referral. The WB stated that they requested support and guidance with Student 1 from administration throughout the year on an ongoing basis. The WB was also in constant communication with the Exceptional Student Education (ESE) coordinators, Assistant Principal Christian Moreira, Principal Thomas, and Student 1's parents. The WB added that all school staff were aware of Student 1's behavior.

The WB reported that they had a call button in their classroom that alerted administration that assistance was needed. The WB explained that they were originally told to use the button when needed. The WB explained that when administration came to their classroom in response to their calls, administration would not do enough to correct Student 1's behavior. The WB noted Student 1 continued to exhibit violent behavior in the classroom throughout the year. The WB felt that Principal Thomas and Assistant Principal Moreira "did not do much" with regard to providing assistance and resolution with Student 1's behavior issues.

The WB explained that before submitting a discipline referral to administration for Student 1, they contacted the parents to discuss the issues and created a behavior plan for Student 1. The WB communicated with Student 1's parents on a daily basis. Additionally, the WB coached and encouraged Student 1.

During a grade level meeting on February 9, 2023, the WB believes Thomas called them out and tried to shame them for the number of discipline referrals they had submitted. Additionally, the WB reported that during a faculty meeting on April 19, 2023, discipline referrals were discussed and Thomas directed staff to stop writing discipline referrals. Principal Thomas projected on a smartboard during the meeting, the WB's name, work email address, and a list of discipline referrals submitted by the WB. The WB explained that Thomas told everyone during the meeting that the teachers who use their call button continuously would not receive help from administration and that the number of referrals submitted was "ridiculous." The WB stated that Thomas told staff that she "handpicks" which referrals are submitted to the district as she (Thomas) did not want the district to know what was happening at the school.

On May 5, 2023, the WB received a tentative assignment letter from PJES Administrative Assistant Diana Hernandez that they would be teaching at PJES the following school year.

The WB alleged that on May 9, 2023, Thomas changed the WB's final evaluation score to a "1" (unsatisfactory) based on the WB's informal observation and one formal observation; however, the WB had not completed their second formal observation. Moreira told the WB that they were required to have two formal observations. The WB believed that once they scheduled their second formal observation with Moreira, Thomas found out and changed their final score to a "1".

The WB said they met with Moreira on May 11, 2023, for their second formal observation in which they received a "4" (highly effective). The WB explained that by Thomas changing their final score to a "1" it caused their second observation score of "4" to have zero effect on their final observation score for the school year.

## **WITNESS INTERVIEWS**

**On September 25, 2023, a sworn recorded interview of previous PJES Learning Team Facilitator Tricia Clarke was conducted at the OIG in West Palm Beach, FL. The following represents actual and paraphrased statements made by “Clarke” as they relate to the Allegation:**

Clarke was previously employed at PJES as a Learning Team Facilitator from January 2022 through May 2023. Some of Clarke’s responsibilities while at PJES included facilitating the Professional Learning Communities (PLC), coaching teachers as assigned, and teaching classes as needed.

Clarke explained that the WB was a new teacher and did not receive any support from administration. Clarke said the WB asked her for assistance and she tried to work with the WB when possible. However, at some point during the year Thomas and Moreira told her (Clarke) not to help anyone out that had not been assigned to her. Clarke did not know if the WB was assigned a mentor.

Clarke recalled walking by the WB’s classroom one day and heard yelling. When she entered the classroom, a student was throwing chrome books. The WB told Clarke that they had pressed the call button several times, but no one came to assist. Clarke used her “walkie” to call for assistance. Subsequently Thomas came to the classroom. Clarke did not know the outcome or the date the incident took place.

Clarke taught science to the same students the WB had in their First-grade class before the WB began teaching at PJES. The OIG asked Clarke if she encountered any issues with any of the student’s behavior. Clarke said “absolutely.” The class was Clarke’s most challenging class when it related to behavior in her entire 20-year career in education. Clarke noted at some point, Student 1 kicked and scratched her. Clarke said “the ball was completely dropped” and “brushed under the rug” with regard to Student 1. Clarke noted Student 1’s behavior progressively got worse throughout the school year.

**On October 24, 2023, a sworn recorded interview of Assistant Principal Galo Moreira was conducted at Royal Palm Beach Community High School in West Palm Beach, FL. The following represents actual and paraphrased statements made by “Moreira” as they relate to the Allegation:**

Moreira was employed as an Assistant Principal at PJES from 2016 through September 2023. Some of Moreira’s responsibilities at PJES included teacher evaluations and student discipline.

Moreira explained that the school had an electronic document (Google form) completed by teachers for student behavior issues. Once completed, the form was routed to Moreira for review. Moreira explained that as part of his review, he would review the incident



details, student details such as 504 accommodations,<sup>2</sup> and any interventions that were put in place for the student. Moreira noted he distinguished incidents by “minor versus major.” Minor incidents such as Level 1 matters were typically resolved with some type of intervention and not processed in SIS. If matters were more serious, the information was entered in SIS. Moreira added that physical aggression was considered major and processed in SIS.

Moreira stated it was important to address the student’s behavior and ensure the classroom environment was right for students. Moreira noted his ultimate goal with discipline was “not creating a huge disciplinary record for each student without asking the right questions...”

Regarding Student 1, Moreira stated Student 1 had a 504 plan. Moreira added Student 1 had “violent” and “aggressive” tendencies. Moreira continued that he often had to intervene in the classroom with regard to Student 1. From Moreira’s perspective there was “a big lack of classroom management” as it related to Student 1 issues. Moreira explained that since it was Student 1’s first year at PJES, school staff was trying to determine what was causing the issues.

The OIG asked Moreira if other teachers had similar issues with Student 1. Moreira said there were other teachers experiencing the same issues with Student 1. Moreira believes that he and Principal Thomas provided staff with the support needed when dealing with Student 1. Moreira denied he directed staff to not submit discipline referrals for Student 1. Moreira also denied he directed staff to not use the call button when needing assistance.

Regarding faculty meetings, Moreira noted that Thomas typically facilitated the meetings. Moreira said that discipline referral data was often discussed and shared during faculty meetings. Moreira added that there were major issues with first and fourth grade as it related to discipline and referrals. Last school year (2022-2023) four first grade teachers left at the beginning of the year due to medical issues and therefore there was a lack of class structure throughout. There was a lack of consistency with instruction in the fourth-grade classes that led to discipline issues.

Moreira denied witnessing teachers being put “on blast” during faculty meetings by Thomas. Moreira added that when data was shared during meetings, it was at times demonstrated by grade level or school wide. In Moreira’s opinion “We were good at addressing matters with the teachers and providing guidance.”

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<sup>2</sup> “504” is a section of a federal civil rights law known as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 specifically prohibiting discrimination against students with disabilities and guaranteeing them a free and appropriate education. A “Section 504 plan” describes the accommodations that the school will provide to support the student’s education. See [fldoe.org, A Parent and Teacher Guide to Section 504: Frequently Asked Questions, https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7690/urlt/0070055-504bro.pdf](https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7690/urlt/0070055-504bro.pdf)

Regarding DCF calls/reports, Moreira said that his message to staff was “If you suspect it, make the call.” Staff was “not necessarily” required to notify administration when and if they called DCF. Moreira denied he instructed staff to not report a matter to DCF.

Moreira said he was not aware of any calls or reports that were made to DCF regarding Student 1. Moreira added that Student 1’s parents were very involved and apologetic for Student 1’s behavior. From Moreira’s perspective, the parents were responsive.

Regarding the WB, Moreira said he worked with and coached the WB individually on a regular basis and ensured other staff were assisting the WB when needed. Additionally, the WB attended CHAMPS Training.<sup>3</sup> The WB was not assigned a mentor, but Moreira noted that the WB was receiving more support than any other new teacher.

Moreira conducted at least three of the WB’s observations. In the initial observation Moreira noted the WB was “disorganized” and demonstrated a “lack of planning” and “consistent behavioral management techniques.” Moreira said that the WB did a “phenomenal job” on the last observation conducted in May 2023. Moreira added that he was “almost astonished at what I saw” because that is not something he had seen in the WB’s prior evaluations.

Moreira stated he did not make the decision or determine the WB’s renewal status for the following school year. However, to Moreira’s understanding the WB was not renewed because they did not implement the strategies or resources provided to them, did not follow scope as it related to observation criteria, and there were attendance issues. Moreira added there were times that he walked into the WB’s classroom and witnessed that there was not “an environment conducive for learning.” Moreira observed the WB behind their desk and not interacting with the students. Moreira added that there was a fourth-grade teacher at PJES that was not renewed for similar issues.

## **SUBJECT INTERVIEW**

**On November 3, 2023, a sworn recorded interview of Principal Tarachell Thomas was conducted at PJES in West Palm Beach, FL. The following represents actual and paraphrased statements made by “Thomas” as they relate to the Allegation<sup>4</sup>:**

Thomas has been employed as a Principal at PJES since August 2015.

Thomas stated that the WB was hired at PJES on December 13, 2022 and released (terminated) during their probationary period on May 12, 2023. Thomas said that the WB was terminated because there were issues with the WB’s attendance and failure to maintain classroom management.

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<sup>3</sup> CHAMPS is a proactive and positive approach used to help educators manage student behavior more positively and effectively. It was designed to help teachers develop an effective classroom management plan and how to make effective decisions about managing behavior. (Information from the Safe Schools Department webpage)

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Art Johnson was virtually present during the interview as Ms. Thomas’s representative.

On February 13, 2023, Thomas provided the WB with a written directive regarding their attendance issues, and not providing lesson plans or requesting a substitute when absent. Thomas noted there were instances where the WB did not notify anyone that they would be late or absent and as a result the students were left outside of the classroom in the hallway.

Thomas reported the following with regard to the WB's failure to maintain classroom management:

- There were times where the WB was seen walking around campus with their students during instructional time.
- The WB did not actively supervise their students.
- The WB made a lot of calls using the classroom call button for the removal of students.
- Lack of response to parent communication. Thomas noted a parent contacted the Central Region due to the WB's lack of response.
- The WB was seen using their cellular phone during recess while students were hitting each other.

On March 6, 2023, Thomas contacted Human Resources Manager Darron Davis and Central Region Instructional Superintendent Dr. Jennifer Sanders regarding the "possibility" of terminating the WB. Although the possibility of the WB's termination was discussed in March, Thomas said she wanted to ensure that the WB was given "every opportunity to learn and grow." The Safe Schools Department provided the WB with behavior support and Thomas assigned the WB three mentors; Priscilla Straker, Tricia Clarke, and Mickey Weiner. Additionally, Guidance Counselor Aimee Trier was tasked to assist the WB with student interventions and classroom monitoring behaviors. Thomas stated that the mentors as well as the WB were aware of the mentorship.

According to Thomas, the WB would at times show improvement, but was not consistent. In April 2023, Thomas was not seeing the needed improvement from the WB. Subsequently, Thomas decided that if the WB "doesn't get better before the year is over, I'm going to release..."

Regarding Student 1, Thomas stated Student 1 was at PJES last year in the process of being tested. Thomas said Student 1 exhibited physical aggression. Thomas noted there was not a staff member at PJES that was not familiar with Student 1's physical aggression. Thomas explained Student 1 required daily medication at a specific time and the WB failed to send Student 1 to the clinic to obtain the medication on a regular basis.

Thomas stated that the WB did not notify her about making or considering making a report to DCF regarding Student 1 and does not know if the WB made a DCF report. Thomas noted "Staff does not have to tell me" when a report to DCF is completed.

On May 12, 2023, Thomas notified the WB of their termination of employment with Administrative Assistant Diana Hernandez present in the conference room. Thomas provided the WB with a termination letter that explained the WB was being recommended for termination of their probationary contract. Probationary contract employees may be dismissed without cause. Thomas said that after repeating to the WB what the letter said, the WB “jumped up” and was “yelling.” Thomas thought the WB was going to attack her. Thomas reported that the WB said, “I’m going to get you, why are you doing this to me?”

Regarding the WB’s observations/evaluations, Thomas denied changing the WB’s scores. Thomas noted that she does not have the ability to change scores. Thomas explained there was a deadline to complete all staff evaluations and she completed last school year’s evaluations on May 9, 2023. Thomas stated she was not aware that on May 11, 2023, Assistant Principal Moreira completed an observation for the WB.

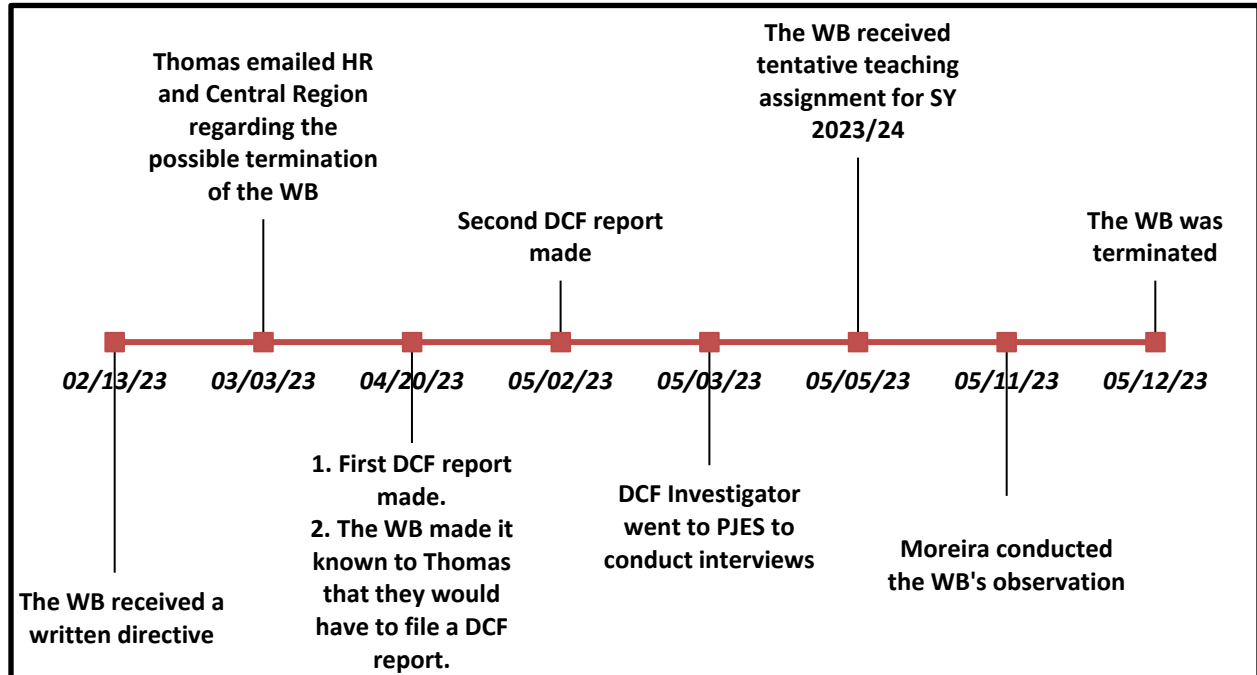
Thomas noted that right before the WB was terminated, the WB asked her to change an evaluation and it is possible they may have been referring to the May 11, 2023, evaluation. The OIG asked Thomas if it was possible for her to have included the May 11, 2023, evaluation into consideration had she been aware of it at the time. Thomas said, “Absolutely.” However, Thomas indicated the scores reflected in Moreira’s May 11, 2023, evaluation would not have changed Thomas’ decision to terminate the WB.

Regarding discipline referrals and the call button in the classroom, Thomas stated that incidents including physical behavior are logged in SIS. Thomas said that discipline referrals were discussed during staff meetings. Thomas explained that during meetings data regarding referrals was shared with staff. Thomas noted teacher or student names were not listed on the data that was shared during the meetings. Thomas denied singling staff members out during meetings. Additionally, Thomas denied she directed staff to not submit or to stop submitting discipline referrals. Thomas denied she told staff she would not respond to calls made using the call buttons.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Thomas read a statement. **(Exhibit 1)**

## **RECORDS ANALYSIS**

Based on information provided by the WB, the following timeline reflects the sequence of relevant events based on the WB’s complaint that Thomas retaliated against the WB by terminating their employment because they made a legally required report to DCF.



Thomas provided documentary evidence that on March 3, 2023, she emailed Human Resources Manager Darron Davis and Central Region Instructional Superintendent Jennifer Sanders regarding the possible termination of the WB's employment, 48 days prior to the WB notifying Thomas they would have to file a DCF report. **(Exhibit 2)**

Based on the email it appears Thomas had a conversation with Davis regarding the WB's potential termination of employment prior to the March 3, 2023, email regarding the WB.

On February 13, 2023, Thomas provided the WB with a written directive titled "Attendance/Lesson Plans/Sub Locator." The document states that Thomas and the WB discussed the number of absences and its effects on student learning. **(Exhibit 3)**

On May 12, 2023, Thomas met with the WB and provided them with a termination letter. The letter stated Thomas was recommending to the Superintendent the termination of the WB's probationary contract with the School District of Palm Beach County, pursuant to sec. 1012.335, Florida Statutes. **(Exhibit 4)**

Florida Statute 1012.335(1)(c) states in relevant part,

"Probationary contract" means an employment contract for a period of 1 school year awarded to instructional personnel upon initial employment in a school district. Probationary contract employees may be dismissed without cause or may resign without breach of contract.

PeopleSoft records reflect that at the time of the WB's termination of they had not completed one school year of employment.

## CONCLUSION

The OIG did not find evidence that Principal Thomas terminated the WB's employment at PJES in retaliation for making a legally mandated report to DCF.

Instead, the investigation demonstrated a record of the WB's performance issues, including a written directive regarding their attendance and lesson plans the WB received February 13, 2023. Additionally, there is evidence that Thomas also considered and discussed termination of the WB's employment based on their poor performance with HR Manager Darron Davis and Instructional Superintendent Dr. Sanders starting in March 2023. Principals Thomas' communications regarding this employment action were based on documented deficiencies that occurred weeks before the WB's reports and interview with DCF regarding Student 1. The greater weight of the evidence supports the conclusion that Thomas' decision to terminate the WB's employment was unrelated to the WB's contact with DCF.

Based on the testimony obtained and the records reviewed, the OIG determined that Principal Tarachell Thomas did not violate Florida Statute section 39.203 and School District Policy 3.28.7 when she terminated the WB's employment on May 12, 2023. Accordingly, the Allegation was **Unsubstantiated**.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Although not part of the allegation, during the WB's statement, they stated that Principal Thomas singled them out to try to shame them during a faculty and a grade level meeting. The OIG individually interviewed five people employed at PJES during the 2022-23 school year regarding their recollection of a staff member being singled out by Thomas during meetings.

The statements provided by the five witnesses varied. While all five recalled attending meetings where discipline referrals were discussed, two witnesses said they did not have any recollection of any staff member being singled out. However, the other three witnesses said the following:


- No names were called out, but administration made comments about a teacher that had submitted over fifty referrals and the meeting became uncomfortable.
- Student and incident data and the teacher's name associated with the referrals was displayed. The witness recalled the WB's name was displayed.
- Referral information was displayed that included various teacher's names. This witness recalled Thomas said "This teacher did not start until January and they have so many referrals" in reference to the WB.

During the witness interviews, comments included, the leadership style at PJES was “fear based”, staff was not comfortable speaking about issues that exist at the school in fear of Thomas’ “wrath”, and Thomas embarrassing and calling out staff was “a regular occurrence.”

*The evidentiary standard used by the School District of Palm Beach County OIG in determining whether the facts and claims asserted in the complaint were proven or disproven is based upon the preponderance of the evidence. Preponderance of the evidence is contrasted with “beyond a reasonable doubt,” which is the more severe test required to convict a criminal and “clear and convincing evidence,” a standard describing proof of a matter established to be substantially more likely than not to be true. OIG investigative findings classified as “substantiated” means there was sufficient evidence to justify a reasonable conclusion that the actions occurred and there was a violation of law, policy, rule, or contract to support the allegation. Investigative findings classified as “unfounded” means sufficient evidence to justify a reasonable conclusion that the actions did not occur and there was no violation of law, policy, rule, or contract to substantiate the allegation. Investigative findings classified as “unsubstantiated” means there was insufficient evidence to justify a reasonable conclusion that the actions did or did not occur and a violation of law, policy, rule, or contract to support the allegation could not be proven or disproven.*

**ATTESTATION**

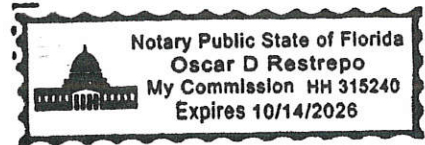
I, the undersigned, do hereby swear, under penalty of perjury, to the best of my personal knowledge, information, and belief, the contents of this report are true and accurate; and I have not knowingly or willfully deprived or allowed another to deprive, the subject of the investigation of any rights contained in Sections 112.532 and 112.533, Florida Statutes. This investigation was conducted pursuant to School District Policy 1.092, Inspector General, and in accordance with applicable Principles and Standards for Offices of Inspectors General as published by the Association of Inspectors General.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Veronica Vallecillo, Senior Investigator

**STATE OF FLORIDA  
COUNTY OF PALM BEACH**

Sworn to (or affirmed) and subscribed before me this 27 day of November, 2023, by Veronica Vallecillo, Senior Investigator for the School District of Palm Beach County, Office of Inspector General, who is personally known by me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Notary Public  
 Notary Public or  Law Enforcement Officer



This investigation was conducted by Veronica Vallecillo, supervised and approved by Director of Investigations Oscar Restrepo. The investigation was conducted in accordance with guidance from the Association of Inspectors General handbook and within standards as prescribed by Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation.

Approved by:  Date: 11/27/23  
Oscar Restrepo, Director of Investigations

Approved by:  Date: 11/27/23  
Teresa Michael, Inspector General



***EXHIBIT LIST***

Information provided by T. Thomas regarding the WB.....Exhibit 1  
Email between Thomas and HR/Instructional Superintendent.....Exhibit 2  
Written Directive dated February 13, 2023 .....Exhibit 3  
Termination letter dated May 12, 2023 .....Exhibit 4

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