




Memorandum

1501 NE 2nd Avenue, Suite 343, Miami, Florida 33132
Phone: (305) 523-0623 ♦ Fax: (305) 523-0613



To: The Honorable Mari Tere Rojas, Chair
and Members, Miami-Dade School Board

Dr. Jose L. Dotres, Superintendent,
Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS)

From: Felix Jimenez, Inspector General 

Date: April 7, 2025

Subject: Debarment of Brenda Steele L.L.C. DBA Scholastic Journeys, Pursuant to Procedures for Sanctions Under School Board Policy 6320.04 – Contractor Discipline; E-141

The above-captioned Item E-141 appearing on the School Board's meeting of April 16, 2025, (and the Fiscal Accountability & Governmental Relations Committee meeting of April 9, 2025) is the direct result of an investigation conducted by the Office of the Inspector General into bid tampering by the sales manager of M-DCPS vendor Scholastic Journeys. The OIG investigation resulted in criminal charges being filed against Scholastic Journeys' South Florida sales manager who was responsible for all the business in South Florida, and most importantly, all business with M-DCPS. This sales manager was convicted of bid tampering, a second-degree felony, for providing forged bid documents to the School District.

Because the company was complicit but not charged criminally, the OIG felt that the company bore responsibility for the actions of its employee. As such, the OIG pursued debarment with the M-DCPS Procurement Department.

On January 10, 2025, the OIG presented the case for debarment to the Contractor Disciplinary Review Committee (CDRC). The OIG detailed to the committee how Scholastic Journeys defrauded the School District. The OIG investigation was initiated based on a complaint received from another M-DCPS travel services vendor who came to learn that his company's identity had been stolen and that fake bids (i.e., travel quotes) had been submitted purportedly coming from his company. The investigation determined that these fake bids were submitted by the aforementioned Scholastic Journey's employee, along with her own real bid. (See the attached OIG Report of Criminal Prosecution.)

Since becoming a vendor in 2011, Scholastic Journeys has arranged out-of-county trips for M-DCPS students and staff. Between 2015 and 2022, Scholastic Journeys was paid over \$3 million dollars by M-DCPS. The investigation showed that since at least 2016, Scholastic Journeys had forged bids from competitors and submitted those bids to M-DCPS employees. By doing so, Scholastic Journeys ensured they were the successful bidder, prevented other local businesses from doing business with M-DCPS and deprived students of the most cost-effective option for their travel.

The CDRC found the OIG's presentation compelling and recommended Scholastic Journeys be debarred for three years, the maximum period available under School Board policy. The OIG appreciates the assistance of the Procurement Department and the Office of General Counsel in guiding us through the debarment hearing process.

Attachment

Cc: Jose Bueno, Chief of Staff, Office of the Superintendent
Ron Steiger, Chief Financial Officer
Charisma Montfort, Chief Procurement Officer
Vivian Santiesteban-Prado, Chief Communication Officer
Walter Harvey, General Counsel, Office of General Counsel
Jon Goodman, Chief Auditor, Office of Management and Compliance Audits



MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL
REPORT OF CRIMINAL PROSECUTION
Employee of Travel Management Services Vendor Scholastic Journeys
Convicted of Tampering with Bids Submitted to M-DCPS
IG22-0003-SI

PREDICATE

This investigation was predicated on a complaint received by the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) in April 2022 from Chad Murray, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and co-owner of FEAT Travel Inc.¹ The complaint involved the Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) Travel Services Vendor Pool, to which FEAT Travel was an approved vendor. Mr. Murray alleged that fake bids—bearing his company’s name and logo—were being submitted without his knowledge or approval to satisfy the three-bid requirement for contract awards. Mr. Murray identified the travel services vendor that won the bid awards wherein the fake bids of his company were submitted. Upon reviewing additional documentation, an investigation was initiated.

SYNOPSIS

On July 24, 2019, M-DCPS awarded Invitation-to-Bid (ITB) 18-032-CM Travel Agencies Services and created a list of 32 pre-approved Travel Agency vendors to provide student travel agency services to M-DCPS. The list of pre-approved travel agency vendors included FEAT Travel and Brenda Steele, LLC D/B/A Scholastic Journeys.² M-DCPS also published a briefing to all Principals, Assistant Principals, and Administrative Offices informing them that those planning trips must obtain three quotes from vendors in the pre-approved pool, one of which must be a certified minority vendor, and no other vendors from outside the pool may provide travel agency services.

In his complaint, Mr. Murray said Scholastic Journeys had prepared and sent quotes purporting to be from FEAT Travel for M-DCPS student field trips. Mr. Murray stated that he received a copy of the fake quote from an M-DCPS employee who was seeking a similar quote from him. Mr. Murray alleged that the fake quote was created by Scholastic Journeys.

The OIG’s investigation substantiated the allegation and revealed that Michele Hand, South Florida Manager for Scholastic Journeys, rigged the bids for student travel services for out-of-county field trips by knowingly submitting fictitious quotes to M-DCPS on behalf of FEAT Travel, without its knowledge or consent, for the benefit of Scholastic Journeys. The investigation, which was conducted in conjunction with the Miami-Dade State Attorney’s Office (SAO) Public Corruption Task Force, resulted in the arrest of Michele Hand on April

¹ FEAT Travel is a Florida corporation and approved Travel Services Vendor for Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

² Brenda Steele, LLC D/B/A Scholastic Journeys, is a sole proprietorship owned by Brenda Steele and based in Cary, NC. It has been an M-DCPS approved vendor since 2011. The business proposal for ITB-18-032-CM listed Brenda Steele and Michele Hand, South Florida Manager, as the persons authorized to make representations for Scholastic Journeys.

30, 2024. She was charged with one count of Bid Tampering, a second-degree felony, in violation of Florida Statute Section 838.22.³

On October 18, 2024, Michele Hand pled nolo contendere to the one-count of Bid Tampering. She was convicted and sentenced to two years of reporting probation with the special condition that she is prohibited from having any business dealings with M-DCPS.

INVESTIGATION

During this investigation the OIG interviewed Chad Murray, CEO and co-owner of FEAT Travel, and M-DCPS employees. The OIG reviewed and analyzed computer files, digital records containing electronic mail communications, procurement records, and accounting records.

The OIG determined that on or about January 20, 2022, Mr. Murray received an unsolicited email request from Miriam Baez, a middle school teacher at Devon Aire K-8 Center. Ms. Baez requested Mr. Murray provide a proposal for a trip to the Islands of Adventure theme park in Orlando, Florida. Ms. Baez provided a copy of a similar proposal forwarded to her via email by Martha Coiras, Theater Director at Winston Park K-8 Center. The email attachments included trip proposals that were purported to be from Scholastic Journeys, FEAT Travel, and Educational Field Trips (EFT).⁴ A review of the email correspondence revealed that Michele Hand, South Florida Sales Manager for Scholastic Journeys, had previously provided Ms. Coiras with the proposals. The OIG located email correspondence from Michele Hand using email address mhand_1974@yahoo.com to Martha Coiras, dated December 14, 2021, that contained the proposal for EFT. The proposal was sent again in an email dated January 19, 2022, using email address michele@scholasticjourneys.com. Ms. Coiras then sent Ms. Baez the quotes provided by Michele Hand for Scholastic Journeys, EFT and FEAT Travel in an email on January 19, 2022, with the subject line "Quotes." The quote included by Ms. Coiras for FEAT Travel contained metadata that identified it as being created by Michele Hand. Mr. Murray stated it was created and submitted without FEAT Travel's knowledge or consent. Ms. Baez subsequently used Scholastic Journeys for the trip to Islands of Adventure on May 31, 2022, at a cost of \$26,187.

The OIG identified at least seven other fake FEAT Travel quotes submitted to M-DCPS in 2020 and 2021 for trips ultimately awarded to Scholastic Journeys. For each quote, the OIG was able to review either metadata that showed the quote was prepared by Michele Hand or emails that showed Michele Hand sent the forged quotes to M-DCPS personnel.

The OIG obtained a sworn statement from Mr. Murray. He verified that each of the eight FEAT Travel quotes were fraudulent and submitted without FEAT Travel's knowledge or consent. Furthermore, Mr. Murray confirmed he did not know Michele Hand or Ms. Coiras and had never communicated with either of them. Mr. Murray told the OIG that FEAT Travel sent all quotes by email and, since 2009, had retained copies of all communications, quotes and other business materials for student travel with M-DCPS in digital folders organized by school

³ Circuit Court Case Number F24-008744

⁴ EFT was a member of the pre-approved travel vendor pool. It stopped doing business in September 2021.

name. Mr. Murray does not have any records of contact with Ms. Coiras, other Winston Park K-8 Center personnel, or personnel at the other schools that purportedly received quotes from FEAT Travel.

In its analysis, the OIG identified 32 schools that used Scholastic Journeys for their out-of-county or out-of-state travel. Fourteen schools used Scholastic Journeys for less than five trips, and 17 schools used Scholastic Journeys for more than five trips. The OIG reviewed email communication and internal funds transaction records for Key Biscayne K-8 Center, Winston Park K-8 Center and Norma Butler Bossard Elementary School. The OIG observed a pattern in Michele Hand's communication with teachers. Michele Hand offered to provide teachers with quotes from other travel agencies to satisfy the three-bid requirement. On several occasions Michele Hand referred to the competitors as sister agencies. Michele Hand would then provide teachers with a true quote from Scholastic Journeys, and two forged quotes from competitors. In every instance Scholastic Journeys was the lowest bidder and awarded the business.

Using records from Accounts Payable and Internal Funds Accounting, the OIG determined M-DCPS made 292 payment transactions to Scholastic Journeys between 2015 and 2022. The total amount paid was \$3,325,209.35.

CASE CLOSURE & SUBSEQUENT EVENTS

On October 18, 2024, Michele Hand was convicted of one count of Bid Tampering, a second-degree felony, in the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Court in Miami-Dade County. Ms. Hand was sentenced to two years of reporting probation. As a condition of her probation, she is prohibited from having business dealings with M-DCPS.

While the criminal charge pertained only to Michele Hand as a Scholastic Journey employee, Scholastic Journeys went before the Contractor Disciplinary Review Committee (CDRC) on January 10, 2025. As the recommending agency, the OIG made a presentation to the CDRC with a recommendation to debar Scholastic Journeys for the maximum term of three years. After a review of the submitted evidence and oral argument by the attorneys, the CDRC voted to debar Scholastic Journeys from conducting business with M-DCPS for a period of three years, effective January 10, 2025. As part of the CDRC recommendation, Scholastic Journeys will be allowed to complete any previously approved field trips for the remainder of school year 2024-25. The recommendation for debarment must be adopted by the School Board of Miami-Dade County before it becomes final.

There is no further work to be done in this case, and it is recommended for closure.

This investigation was conducted in accordance with the *Quality Standards for Investigations* found within the *Principles and Standards for Offices of Inspector General* as promulgated by the Association of Inspectors General.
