




Memorandum



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

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

From: Felix Jimenez, Inspector General 

Date: October 22, 2024

Subject: Employee of a Travel Management Services Vendor Convicted for Tampering
with Bids Submitted to M-DCPS; IG-22-0003-SI

Michele Hand, an employee of Scholastic Journeys a certified M-DCPS travel management services vendor, was convicted of one count of Bid Tampering, a second-degree felony, on October 18, 2024, in connection with providing price proposals for arranging student out-of-county fieldtrips.

Scholastic Journeys is a sole proprietorship owned by Brenda Steele LLC. Brenda Steele LLC is based in Cary, North Carolina. During the course of the investigation Scholastic Journeys was an M-DCPS certified Small Business Enterprise (SBE) and Woman-owned Business Enterprise (WBE) for Travel Management Services. In 2019, Scholastic Journeys was one of 32 vendors placed into the newly created pre-approved Travel Agencies Services pool under M-DCPS's awarded Invitation to Bid, ITB-18-032-CM. Under the pool, quotes from three travel service vendors must be submitted for each proposed student trip with an estimated travel budget in excess of \$1,000; travel services are awarded to the lowest responsive and responsible bidder. Schools utilize this travel services vendor pool to organize student fieldtrips to locations within Florida, such as theme parks in the Orlando area and historic sites in St. Augustine. Between 2017 and March of 2022, Scholastic Journeys received approximately \$1 million from M-DCPS. Payments for travel services can be made directly by the school paid through Internal Funds Accounting or through Accounts Payable using a purchase order.

In 2020 and 2022, Ms. Hand submitted fictitious bids that purported to be from competitors. Ms. Hand was the Regional Sales Manager for Scholastic Journeys and, as such, interacted with and provided quotes, bids and proposals to teachers within M-DCPS for out-of-county fieldtrips. One competitor, FEAT Travel, Inc, contacted the OIG when it became aware that fictitious bids were being submitted using its identity. The investigation revealed that Ms. Hand submitted a price proposal for Scholastic Journeys and two

quotes that purported to be from other approved travel vendors. The quote from Scholastic Journeys was the lowest of the three quotes. This scheme prevented other businesses from having a fair opportunity to compete and negated the School Board's efforts to ensure students paid the most economical cost for their activities.

Ms. Hand was sentenced to two years of reporting probation. As a condition of her probation, Ms. Hand is prohibited from having business dealings with M-DCPS. While the criminal charge pertained only to Ms. Hand as Scholastic Journey's employee, the OIG intends on evaluating this vendor's continued status with the M-DCPS Procurement Management Services. The M-DCPS Office of the Inspector General (OIG) investigated the matter jointly with the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office Public Corruption Task Force.

cc: Jose Bueno, Chief of Staff, Office of the Superintendent
Ron Steiger, Chief Financial Officer
Charisma Montfort, Chief Procurement Officer
Vivian Santiesteban-Pardo, Chief Communication Officer
Ivan E. Silva, Chief of Police, Miami-Dade County Schools Police Department
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