



MARYLAND OFFICE OF THE
INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR EDUCATION

Richard P. Henry
Inspector General

Sean T. Chaney
Deputy Inspector General

OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR EDUCATION

Fiscal Year 2027 Operating Budget
Response to Department of Legislative Services Budget Analysis

House Appropriation Committee
Education and Economic Development Subcommittee
Delegate Stephanie M. Smith
January 29, 2026

Senate Budget and Taxation Committee
Education, Business and Administration Subcommittee
Senator Nancy J. King
February 2, 2026

Background

The Maryland Office of the Inspector General for Education (OIGE) is an independent entity within the State government. The office examines and investigates the management and affairs of county education boards, local school systems, public schools, and non-public schools that receive state funding to determine whether established policies and procedures comply with federal and state laws. The Office may also examine and investigate the management and affairs of the Maryland State Department of Education and the Inter-agency Commission on School Construction.

The Office investigates complaints and information regarding civil rights violations of students and employees, as defined in federal or state law. The Office conducts an annual review of local school systems to ensure that policies and procedures governing the prevention and reporting of child abuse and neglect comply with applicable federal and state laws on child abuse and neglect.

In 2019, the OIGE was established as an independent agency; however, its budget was initially allocated to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) under R00A08. Effective fiscal 2026, the OIGE operates under a new, independent budget code, D73A01.

Analysis

The Office of the Inspector General for Education concurs with the Governor's Allowance.

Key Observations

Below is the status of its recommendations and the actions local education agencies (LEAs) have taken to address the issues identified in the investigations.

Investigation 1

Complaint: Violation of State law and board policies in the procurement of legal services.

Findings: OIGE found that the Somerset County Board of Education violated State law and local board policies in procuring legal services. During the investigation, the board refused to cooperate, limiting OIGE's ability to fully document the procurement process; however, available documentation supported a finding of noncompliance.

Responsive Action Taken: At its December 9, 2025 meeting, the State Board considered and adopted a motion authorizing the State Superintendent to withhold funds under Education Article §2-303(b)(2) in the amount of the Somerset County Board of Education's legal services contract if the local board did not take formal public action to approve the contract within 30 days of the State Board's motion. This action allowed the local board to remedy the legal violations addressed in our report. (See Attachment 1)

Investigation 2

Complaint: Allegations of unfair grade-changing practices at Suitland High School in Prince George's County.

Findings: OIGE determined that staff did not follow administrative procedures related to grading and instructional requirements. Limited supervision and extended staff absences contributed to inconsistent application of grading practices, resulting in students receiving grades for a course without documented instruction.

Responsive Action Taken: OIGE provided a copy of the report and its recommendations to Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) Interim Superintendent Shawn Joseph on October 20, 2025. At that time, Dr. Joseph acknowledged receipt of our report and stated he would review further with his Executive Team. OIGE requested a response by November 21, 2025. As of this writing, PGCPS has not provided a response to our report or actions to be taken.

Investigation 3

Complaint: Staffing and student safety concerns at Cedar Lane School in Howard County.

Findings: The investigation found that classrooms operated for extended periods without assigned certified special education teachers, which did not fully align with instructional standards. While safety procedures were in place, staffing shortages and limited behavioral support resources contributed to ongoing operational challenges.

Responsive Action Taken: Howard County Public Schools system acknowledged the concerns of OIGE and provided a response plan aimed at improving staffing, safety, and operational coordination at the Cedar Lane School. (See Attachment 2)

Investigative Audit 1

Complaint: Management of Concentration of Poverty Grant (CPG) funds in Montgomery and Somerset counties.

Findings: OIGE found no instances of noncompliance in Montgomery County. In Somerset County, OIGE identified the use of grant funds for purposes not permitted under revised MSDE spending guidance, including the purchase of gift cards. OIGE recommended updates to local policies, inventory controls, and reporting practices to improve oversight of grant expenditures.

Responsive Action Taken: Both Montgomery and Somerset County Public School (SCPS) systems have plans to update inventory policies to ensure that sensitive items purchased with CPG funds comply with MSDE's revised guidance. Both LEAs will have these processes in place for the current school year (2025-2026).

Montgomery County schools implemented the required reporting procedure during the 2024-2025 school year and continued it for the 2025-2026 school year. MCPS is committed to providing the Board of Education (BOE) and County Council with detailed supplemental appropriations for their respective reviews.

Somerset County has implemented processes to account for CPG funds in line with restricted revenue, even though the funds were moved to Unrestricted in FY2023. Additionally, SCPS will create written procedures prohibiting the purchase of gift cards with Concentration of Poverty funds in accordance with MSDE's revised guidance.

Secondly, the Office of Legislative Services (OLS) recommended that OIGE comment on the factors contributing to the decline in investigations closed in calendar year 2025 and provide a status update on the current backlog of open investigations. OIGE has encountered several factors that have contributed to delays in our investigations. Below are several issues that have affected the release of our reports.

- 1) *Document Production:* Records and responsive documents were produced in stages by LEAs rather than all at once, requiring ongoing review and follow-up requests. In some investigations, this process can take years and requires the review of thousands of documents.
- 2) *Dependency on External Entities:* Progress depended on LEA timelines, personnel availability, and responsiveness, all outside OIGE's control.
- 3) *Sequencing of Interviews:* Certain interviews must be conducted after document review or before witness interviews to ensure accuracy and efficiency, thereby extending the overall timeline.

- 4) *Interview Constraints:* Interviews with employees and board of education members required coordination among multiple parties, including LEA and BOE General Counsels, the subject or witness, and union representatives. Interviews may involve four to five required attendees, making scheduling complex and time-consuming. Occasionally, a General Counsel may opt to issue conflict counsel, which can cause months of delay.
- 5) *Criminal Referrals:* Cases referred to local and federal law enforcement may take longer to close and be released to the public. In these cases, the OIGE must comply with the requirements of the investigating agency, grand jury restrictions, and prosecutorial guidance.

The Office of the Inspector General for Education is available to answer any questions or concerns you or the membership might have regarding our budget and investigative findings.

Respectfully,



Richard P. Henry
Inspector General

Attachments

ATTACHMENT 1

December 10, 2025

Mr. Matthew Lankford
Chairperson
Somerset County Board of Education
7982A Tawes Campus Drive
Westover, Maryland 21871

Dear Chair Lankford:

On November 13, 2025, the State Board received a report from the Office of the Inspector General for Education (OIGE) outlining concerns regarding the Somerset County Board of Education's actions related to the procurement of legal services at the local board's February 13, 2025 meeting. More specifically, the OIGE found that the local board terminated its prior counsel's contract and hired new counsel in closed session and failed to vote on that action in the public meeting. As a result, the local board violated Education Article §3-1204, which states:

“(a) All final actions of the county board shall be taken at a public meeting. The board shall keep a formal record of each public meeting.

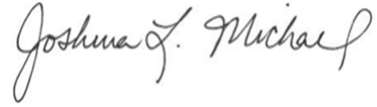
(b) This section does not prohibit the board from meeting and deliberating in executive session provided that all action is taken at a public meeting.”

At its meeting on December 9, 2025, the State Board voted to direct the State Superintendent to require the Comptroller to withhold funding from the Somerset County Board of Education in the amount of the legal services contract if the local board does not take action to publicly vote on the contract within 30 days of this notice. To prevent the initiation of this withholding, please provide written confirmation that the local board has taken action to comply with Education Article §3-1204 by January 9, 2026.

Additionally, the OIGE report identified concerns with the local board's compliance with procurement laws and policies more generally. The State Board strongly encourages at least two members of the local board to participate in procurement training offered by the Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) before the end of fiscal year 2026 to ensure an appropriate understanding of procurement requirements. Please provide an update on the board's progress toward completing this training by July 1, 2026.

Thank you for your attention to these matters. Please do not hesitate to contact the State Board should you have questions or require additional clarification.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joshua L. Michael". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Joshua L. Michael, Ph.D.
President, State Board of Education

c: W. David Bromwell, Interim Superintendent, Somerset County Public Schools
Carey M. Wright, Ed.D., State Superintendent of Schools
Richard P. Henry, Inspector General for Education

December 10, 2025

Richard P. Henry
Inspector General for Education
Office of the Inspector General for Education

Dear Inspector General Henry:

On behalf of the Maryland State Board of Education, I am writing to provide an update on the actions the State Board has taken in direct response to the concerns your office raised regarding the Somerset County Board of Education's failure to publicly approve a legal services contract, as required by Education Article §3-1204, and broader issues identified with procurement practices among local education agencies (LEAs).

1. Action Related to Somerset County Board of Education

At its December 9, 2025 meeting, the State Board considered and adopted a motion authorizing the State Superintendent to withhold funds under Education Article §2-303(b)(2) in the amount of the Somerset County Board of Education's legal services contract if the local board does not take formal public action to approve the contract within 30 days of the State Board's motion. This action gives the local board the opportunity to remedy the legal violations addressed in your report.

In the notice to the local board, the State Board strongly encouraged at least two members of the local board to participate in procurement training offered by the Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) before the end of fiscal year 2026 to ensure an appropriate understanding of procurement requirements. The notice requested that the local board provide an update on the board's progress toward completing this training by July 1, 2026.

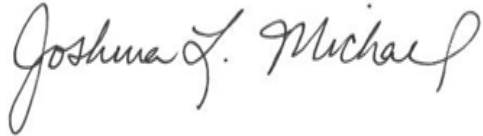
2. Future Collaboration and Training Expectations

The State Board also reviewed the recommendation that all local board members receive additional training on procurement practices. The Board will consider pursuing additional avenues, including regulatory and statutory changes relating to local board training. We have been in contact with MABE about ways to embed additional training for local board members on this issue.

We appreciate you bringing this matter to our attention and bringing recommendations on behalf of the OIGE.

The issues raised in your report highlight the importance of clear standards and consistent oversight, and the State Board values the opportunity to collaborate to address these concerns. If you require additional information or wish to discuss these actions further, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joshua L. Michael". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'J' and 'M'.

Joshua L. Michael, Ph.D.

President, State Board of Education

CC: Carey M. Wright, Ed.D., State Superintendent of Schools
Matthew Lankford, Chairperson, Somerset County Board of Education
W. David Bromwell, Interim Superintendent, Somerset County Public Schools
Milt Nagel, Executive Director, MABE

ATTACHMENT 2



September 12, 2025

Richard P. Henry, Inspector General for Education
Maryland Office of Inspector General for Education
100 Community Place, 4th Floor
Crownsville, Maryland 21032
Richard.henry@maryland.gov

Dear Inspector General Henry:

The Office of Inspector General for Education report, dated August 5, 2025, which was provided to Mr. William J. Barnes, Superintendent, Howard County Public School System (HCPSS), was forwarded to the Office of General Counsel (HCPSS) for response. In order to comprehensively respond to the recommendations in the report, the Office of General Counsel collaborated with the Division of Schools, the Department of Special Education, and the Department of Human Resources. HCPSS appreciates the opportunity to provide information that demonstrates its progress in addressing the recommendations and the actions which continue to be taken to address students' needs and support Cedar Lane School.

Background

In January 2025, the Office of the Inspector General for Education (OIGE) initiated an investigation in response to a complaint regarding staffing and safety concerns at Cedar Lane School. As part of the investigation, OIGE conducted an interview with the principal, Mr. Paul Owens, who also encouraged the investigative team to conduct an on-site visit to better understand the school environment and operational needs. HCPSS is unaware of other individuals, including any members of the Department of Special Education, who were interviewed during the investigation.

Summary of the Report

The final report, issued on August 5, 2025, acknowledged Cedar Lane School's ongoing efforts to provide a safe and supportive environment for students with significant and complex needs amid national staffing shortages. OIGE confirmed that some classrooms were operating without certified special education teachers, instead relying on paraeducators supported by certified staff in nearby classrooms. While this model satisfied the required student-to-staff ratios under COMAR 13A.09.10.17(E), it does not fully meet the instructional standards requiring certified personnel to deliver specially designed instruction.

In terms of safety, the report noted Cedar Lane School's structured crisis response practices, including the use of modified lockdowns and the Behavioral Response Team (BRT). Still, concerns were raised around the limited availability of Registered Behavior Technicians (RBTs), the need for updated emergency communication systems, and facility vulnerabilities related to

access control and proximity of high-needs student populations. The report concluded with five recommendations aimed at improving staffing, safety, and operational coordination.

HCPSS acknowledges the concerns of OIGE and appreciates that the report also notes the efforts of Cedar Lane School staff to maintain student safety. As the report states “Regarding student safety, the OIGE finds that Cedar Lane has implemented protocols to mitigate behavioral incidents that are likely to occur, thereby maintaining a safer learning environment. The school’s use of modified lockdowns, the activation of its Behavioral Response Team (BRT), and adherence to de-escalation practices reflect an understanding of behavioral crises among students with significant needs. Staff interviews confirmed the knowledgeable application of these procedures.”

Recommendation #1: Continue Efforts to Recruit Certified Special Education Teachers

Response: Cedar Lane School is currently fully staffed for teachers for the 2025-2026 school year, and we are currently finalizing the hiring for two open paraeducator positions. HCPSS’ human resources team has also implemented a series of actions to support our pipeline of special educators, including establishing a pool of pre-screened long-term substitute teachers, exploring different recruitment sources, and partnerships with universities.

Recommendation #2: Invest in Additional Registered Behavior Technicians (RBTs)

Response:

For the 2025-26 school year, Cedar Lane School will have seven Registered Behavior Technicians and three Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA) on staff. The staffing allocation represents an addition of 6 RBTs and 2 BCBAAs for this school year.

Recommendation #3: Reconfigure Classrooms to Protect Medically Fragile Students

Response: Cedar Lane School is currently serving approximately 17 medically fragile students. Reconfiguring classroom assignments to better separate students with aggressive behaviors from medically fragile peers would require significant physical moves across the building. School system support is being provided to assess logistics and develop a feasible reconfiguration plan that minimizes disruption. The principal continues to explore ways to improve proximity-based safety while maintaining access to necessary services and support spaces.

HCPSS is working on the evaluation and expansion of the special education program continuum to provide additional options for learners who benefit from smaller, more specialized environments that are responsive to medical and physical needs while ensuring a safe and supportive setting.

Recommendation #4: Address Gaps in Emergency Communication and Door Alarms

Response:

In late April of 2025, the school was provided with 17 additional walkie-talkies, for a total of 40 walkie-talkies, to provide additional communication devices. The addition has allowed for one walkie-talkie to be in each classroom. In alignment with §7-11A-01 to §7-11A.03 of the *Education Article*, school system staff will collaborate with school-based staff to establish a student support

response structure that aligns with the needs of the students and maintains safety for staff and students. This will include a tiered response system for student behavioral needs.

Recommendation #5: Improve Communication and Responsiveness to Staff Concerns

Response: Principal Owens is working closely with Cedar Lane School's Instructional Facilitator and school director to build a structured system for addressing staff feedback and operational concerns. He understands the value of regular feedback loops and staff engagement protocols that promote trust, collaboration, and shared problem-solving.

As delineated in this response, HCPSS considered the recommendations of the OIGE report and has taken appropriate steps to implement the recommendations. With this submission, HCPSS considers the investigation and response complete; however, as staffing of special education positions remains a challenge for the school system and other school systems within the State of Maryland, HCPSS will continue to develop and utilize strategies to recruit for special education positions. Additionally, HCPSS will continue to address student safety and educational needs at Cedar Lane School. Please do not hesitate to contact me at 410-313-6604 or stephen_cowles@hcpss.org if OIGE requires any further information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Stephen Cowles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "J." and last name "Cowles" clearly distinguishable.

J. Stephen Cowles
General Counsel

c: Joshua L. Michael, Ph.D., President, Maryland State Board of Education
Carey M. Wright, Ed.D., State Superintendent of Schools
Jolene Mosley, Chair, Howard County Board of Education
William J. Barnes, Superintendent of Schools, HCPSS
Jen Robinson, Chief, Division of Schools, HCPSS
Jennifer Webster, Chief, Division of Academics, HCPSS
Jennifer Riccardi, Acting Executive Director, Special Education, HCPSS