



HARFORD COUNTY, MARYLAND

Office of the County Auditor

INVESTIGATION OF HCPS 2024 NSBA CONFERENCE TRAVEL

Report Number:
2026-I-01

Report Date:
01/16/2026

Members of the Harford County Council:

At the request of the Harford County Council, and in accordance with § 213 and 215 of the Harford County Charter, we have performed an investigation of travel costs for Harford County Public Schools (HCPS) officials for the 2024 National School Board Association (NSBA) Conference in April 2024 and reports of missing devices during the trip.

The objectives of this investigation were to:

- Confirm that expenses related to the NSBA conference trip were appropriate, allowable, and supported by receipts;
- Determine what steps were taken by HCPS to address the matter of lost equipment; and
- Determine the impact of HCPS equipment reported as missing.

Our conclusion, based on the evidence obtained, is travel costs were appropriate and supported, officials disabled network accounts and devices when items were reported missing; and it is highly unlikely that student, employee or financial records were compromised. This assessment is based on the review procedures performed, summarized later in this report.

The scope of this review was limited to the trip in question and related events. We did not consider the overall effectiveness of HCPS' internal controls. The results of the review and our findings are detailed in this report.

I would like to thank Laura Tucholski, HCPS' Chief Auditor, for her assistance and expertise in this investigation.

Sincerely,

Chrystal Brooks
County Auditor

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TIMELINE OF EVENTS

To help readers understand our conclusions better, we present the following timeline of events that are within the scope of this investigation:

April 5, 2024 Eight of nine HCPS Board Members plus Superintendent Sean Bulson and Director of Administration Eric Davis were in New Orleans, LA for the National School Board Association Conference. Officials lodged at four different hotels; Dr. Bulson and Dr. Davis and stayed at the Marriott on Canal Street.

Officials attended a sponsored dinner in the evening. Dr. Bulson carried his wallet, watch and two phones with him. His personal iPad and his HCPS laptop remained in his hotel room.

April 6, 2024 Upon waking in his hotel room, Dr. Bulson *believed* that he had been robbed. He told Dr. Davis and used Davis' phone to call his (Bulson's) wife, the police and HCPS' Director of Technology and Information Services (OTIS).

The police call at 9:21 am records that Dr. Bulson reported his wallet, two phones, an iPad, an Apple Watch, and a laptop computer were stolen. Of these items, the laptop and an iPhone were HCPS property.

HCPS' Director of OTIS directed his staff to disable Dr. Bulson's network account and devices. There are no longer records of these actions. A Verizon email at 1:47 pm confirms the phone was suspended and reported lost/stolen.

Dr. Bulson, Dr. Davis and Board Member Mueller gave a presentation at the conference at 11:00 am. Dr. Bulson told Dr. Poynton about the missing devices immediately after the presentation; he advised Dr. Bulson to contact the police and hotel security. Dr. Mueller was aware that Dr. Bulson's phone was "misplaced".

At 1:23 pm a New Orleans police officer was en route to respond to Dr. Bulson's call. At 1:55 pm, the Officer was unable to make contact. Dr. Bulson and Dr. Davis were at the conference at this time. Accordingly, no police report was made.

	In the evening, Dr. Poynton told at least two other Board members (Hahn and Paige) that Dr. Bulson's phone and computer were stolen.
April 7, 2024	Dr. Bulson's personal cell phone was replaced while in New Orleans.
<i>(presumably, April 7, 2024)</i>	Dr. Bulson found his wallet in the hotel room. It was missing all of the cash and one credit card.
April 8, 2024	<p>HCPS officials returned to Maryland. While driving from the airport with Dr. Davis, Dr. Bulson received a call from Marriott's security advising that some items were found in the room's safe after checking out. His description of the missing items was sufficient for Marriott to agree that they belonged to him. Dr. Bulson coordinated with Marriott to return the items via FedEx. He used his personal funds to have the items shipped back to him.</p> <p><i>Dr. Bulson could not speak to how the items got into the safe and does not remember putting them there himself. We do not know why his search of the room did not include the safe.</i></p> <p>A new HCPS cell phone was received and activated for Dr. Bulson. A loaner laptop was provided for Dr. Bulson to use until his assigned device was returned.</p>
April 9, 2024	Marriott shipped two packages to Dr. Bulson via FedEx.
April 12, 2024	<p>FedEx delivered the two packages to Dr. Bulson.</p> <p>HCPS' Endpoint Technician visually inspected the laptop and determined that it did not appear to have been tampered with. There were no diagnostic procedures performed.</p>
<i>Sometime before April 15, 2024</i>	Dr. Bulson advised Dr. Poynton that the laptop had been found in the hotel room.
April 15, 2024	At the Board of Education meeting, Dr. Bulson showed Dr. Poynton that he had his computer back. Dr. Poynton did not believe any further follow-up was necessary.
January 5, 2026	Chris Papst, a local reporter, emailed a request for comment to Board Members advising that he had a recording of the April 6, 2024 police call.

<i>Sometime on or before January 7, 2026</i>	Dr Poynton asked HCPS' Director of OTIS to summarize the actions taken by the OTIS after being notified of the missing devices in April 2024.
January 7, 2026	Dr. Poynton requested a review by the Maryland Office of the Inspector General for Education (OIGE). <i>The OIGE report was issued on 1/12/26.</i>

BACKGROUND, OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

In April 2024, Harford County Board of Education Members, Superintendent Sean Bulson and Director of Administration Eric Davis attended the National School Board Association Conference in New Orleans, LA. During that trip, Dr. Bulson contacted the New Orleans police department to report that several items were stolen from his hotel room, including a cell phone and laptop computer belonging to HCPS. HCPS officials (and Board Members) were aware of the lost equipment during the conference and steps were taken to disable the devices and Dr. Bulson's network account. The devices were later located by hotel employees and delivered to Dr. Bulson after he returned to Maryland. No further action was taken at the time. In January 2026, an audio recording of Dr. Bulson's call to the police was made public, prompting County Council President Patrick Vincenti's request for an investigation into the matter. Mr. Vincenti's request was followed up with an approval to conduct an audit by the full County Council on January 13, 2026.

In order to address the questions posed by the County Council (the project objectives), our procedures included interviewing personnel, observation, and testing as described in the table below.

Scope of Review	Result
Confirm that expenses related to the NSBA conference trip were appropriate, allowable, and supported by receipts	
Review expense reimbursements and purchase card transactions related to the NSBA trip to confirm: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Who attended the trip? b) Was their attendance appropriate? c) Were costs paid appropriate, allowable, and supported by receipts? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eight of the nine Board Members attended the conference. Sean Bulson, Superintendent, and Eric Davis, Director of Administration also attended. • These attendees were appropriate. Dr. Bulson, Dr. Davis and Board Member Meuller gave a presentation at the conference. • We inspected expense reimbursements and purchase card transactions and confirmed that receipts were available to support the transactions and transactions were appropriate. A total of \$23,879.91 was paid by HCPS to cover registration fees, travel costs, lodgings, and meal reimbursements for the 10 attendees. <p>We conclude that conference and travel expenses were appropriate, allowable, and supported.</p>

Scope of Review	Result
Determine what steps were taken by HCPS to address the matter of lost equipment	
<p>Interview officials to determine:</p> <p>a) When they became aware of the missing equipment and</p> <p>b) What steps they took in response.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We interviewed Dr. Bulson, Dr. Davis, 7 Board of Education members, HCPS' Director of OTIS and 2 County Council Members. • Summarizing interviews with various officials, we found that, upon waking in his hotel room on April 6, 2024, Dr. Bulson realized that he was missing some items. Using the cell phone of Eric Davis, who was staying in a nearby room, Dr. Bulson called the police (resulting in the audio recording recently made public) and, soon after, contacted HCPS' Director of OTIS. • Dr. Bulson advised Dr. Poynton of the missing devices on April 6, 2024 immediately following his presentation at the conference. • Although Dr. Bulson contacted the police, he did not speak to an officer. A police Incident Details report shows "N/A on C/B 2X" at 1:55 pm. We take this to mean that there was no answer to two call backs to Dr. Davis' phone. At that time, Dr. Davis would have been at the conference, explaining why no police report/complaint was made. <p>We conclude that missing equipment was reported timely to school officials.</p>
<p>Review documents to confirm the information learned in interviews.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We reviewed records from Verizon confirming that Dr. Bulson's Harford County Public Schools phone was deactivated on April 6, 2024. • Records of HCPS account changes and logins are no longer available given the length of time that has passed since the events in question. We received written confirmation from HCPS' Director of OTIS that Dr. Bulson's network account and devices were disabled on April 6, 2024. <p>We conclude that documentation of April 2024 events is limited, so we have to rely on representations made by officials.</p>

Scope of Review	Result
Consider the risk of a 'cover-up'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on our interviews, in New Orleans and in the following days, several officials were told of the missing equipment and/or heard rumors of an incident and were also aware of the devices being recovered. None of those officials sought further review of the circumstances until January 2026. In any audit, there is a risk that fraud may occur and not be detected, particularly if there is collusion involved. Accordingly, we considered the risk that a few officials could conspire to cover up the events leading up to the devices being lost. However, such events are outside of the scope of our review, and we designed our procedures to gather relevant evidence to confirm what happened after items were discovered missing. <p>We conclude the impact of the risk of collusion is acceptably low with regard to our investigation objectives.</p>
Determine the impact of HCPS equipment reported as missing	
Observe equipment and review records to confirm the current disposition of devices reported missing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hotel employees contacted Dr. Bulson after checkout to advise that items were found in the room's safe. We inspected a Found Item report from Marriott security, dated "4/8/2024 17:37", which includes the following comments: <div> <p>Found Narrative</p> <p>dell laptop with Harford county public schools on it apple tablet two iPhone portable charger apple watch all items left in safe</p> </div> The hotel's Found Item report confirms that they shipped the devices to Dr. Bulson at his expense. There were two shipments with partial (sanitized) tracking numbers noted. The hotel's tracking records confirm they were shipped on "4/9/2024" and delivered on "4/12/2024" to Dr. Bulson's front

Scope of Review	Result
	<p>door. We confirmed that Dr. Bulson paid two shipping charges to FedEx in the relevant time frame.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• On January 6, 2026, we observed the laptop in question in the office of HCPS' Director of OTIS. We held the device, noted its serial number, and observed that it had large font letter stickers on the keys. When Dr. Bulson was due for a new computer, several months after the New Orleans trip, his old laptop was reimaged (i.e. erased and reconfigured for a specific user) and assigned to a visually impaired student who needed a computer with larger screen than the computers normally assigned to students.• Using the cell phone's IMEI number, we reviewed records to confirm that the old cell phone was returned to the Office of Technology and later recycled along with other devices in November 2024. <p>We conclude that, although reportedly stolen, the HCPS devices were misplaced and then recovered.</p>

Scope of Review	Result
Inspect records to determine what sensitive information might be compromised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We were advised that the missing cell phone was password protected and HCPS devices require two factor authentication to access files remotely. • File and email access on the laptop was disabled on 4/6/24 per the confirmation provided by HCPS' Director of OTIS. • We reviewed system access to the student records system (eSchool Plus) and confirmed that Dr. Bulson did not have access. • We reviewed system access to the personnel and financial reporting system (Lawson) and confirmed that Dr. Bulson had limited access to those records. • We believe the window for inappropriate access to the devices was limited to the time the devices were in the custody of Marriott security. Given that the hotel has systems in place to track found items, we believe they are reputationally incentivized to ensure that items are not mishandled in their custody. <p>We conclude that unauthorized access to student, employee, or financial records is highly unlikely.</p>

The Maryland Office of the Inspector General for Education (OIGE) issued a report on this subject matter on January 12, 2026. The findings, conclusion and interview notes in that report agree with the information we obtained. Below are quotes from their report, with which we concur, and are also applicable to our investigation:

“This review did not examine the specific circumstances surrounding how the items became misplaced before their recovery, as matters related to individual conduct or personnel accountability fall within HCPS’s administrative authority and are outside the scope of this investigation.”

“OIGE found that the incident surrounding the 2024 NSBA conference and the return of the alleged stolen items were considered a “dead issue” by BOE President Poynton and other board members. OIGE also found that board members were aware of what has been described as “rumors,” or that nothing occurred because there was nothing reportable. Dr. Bulson has continued in his role for approximately 20 months after this incident without any further concerns from the board.”

“OIGE is aware of the totality of the events that occurred on April 5, 2024. However, those events fall outside the Inspector General’s statutory authority and do not constitute fraud, waste, or abuse. OIGE views the events of April 5, 2024, as a personal matter involving an individual reporting a crime.”

Harford County Public Schools management is responsible for establishing and maintaining effective internal controls. Internal control is a process designed to provide reasonable assurance that objectives pertaining to the reliability of financial records, effectiveness and efficiency of operations including safeguarding of assets and compliance with applicable laws, rules and regulations are achieved. Because of inherent limitations in internal control, errors or fraud may nevertheless occur and not be detected. Internal controls were not significant to the investigation’s objectives and we did not consider all of the components of HCPS’ internal controls.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.