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COLUMBUS - For months now, a dark fog of student academic record finagle has hovered over the Columbus City School district, sparking two investigations into the matter, one by the district's own internal auditor and another by the Auditor of State's Office.

Since these investigations began, there have been steady drops of evidence coming out of the probes, pointing to some student attendance record euchre by district officials. Superintendent Gene Harris, for her part, indicated that when she became aware of these potential problems,

she "immediately notified the Ohio Department of Education and the Auditor of State's Office, and asked them to conduct an investigation," which they initiated.

The district's internal auditor, Carolyn smith, also launched one, uncovering some initial harbingers of tampering with students attendance records involving "80 of 81 cases with no apparent reason. It was based on preliminary findings but the same issue was also noted in the probe conducted by the Auditor of State.

But while Smith's probe focused only on Columbus School District, Auditor of State David Yost probed other districts in the state as well, uncovering some problems with five school districts. The five districts found to have "improperly withdrawn students from their enrollment" include, Campbell City School in Mahoning County, Cleveland Municipal City School in Cuyahoga County, Columbus City School District in Franklin County, Marion City School District in Marion County, and Toledo Public School District in Lucas County.

In a statement released with the full report last week, the Auditor of State noted "irregularities" with the five districts and made "initial recommendations to improve the system." But it is worth noting that, while the state auditor's investigation involved other school districts, this investigation was triggered by questions over students' attendance record skullduggery in the Columbus School district, with Toledo Public Schools and Lockland City Schools coming out to declare similar issues in their districts as well.

The five school districts were part of the 47 school districts selected to be a part of the probe. Ultimately, 100 schools in the 47 districts were probed. The schools were chosen because they had the highest number of students whose assessment test scores were "rolled up" to the state. What's that? It means students whose scores were not counted as part of the school or district's scores.

Now, the question is, what are some of the other reasons that account for why these student's scores were "rolled up"?

Harris has an answer.

Size of the district and frequent movement of students are a big part of it, she said, in a statement of response to the Auditor of State report.

"It should not be surprising that the major metropolitan school districts, including Columbus, would be among the top school districts with the highest number of students rolling up to be counted at the state level," said Harris, who went on to explain that "Our student population is extremely mobile in that many students change schools during a school year or leave the district and sometimes return as their family situation changes."

Altogether, ten schools in the Columbus School District were involved in the probe including: Westmoor Middle School, Southmoor Middle School, Starling Middle School, Champion Middle School, Yorktown Middle School, Medina Middle School, Hilltonia Middle School, Buckeye Middle School, Johnson Park Middle School, and Sherwood Middle School. Taken together, these ten schools account for 1,238 number of "tested state roll up students."

The report identified the number of issues associated with each school, ranging from a high of "58" issues to a low of "7." Issues identified with these schools could be amalgamated into three main categories: 'files that could not be located,' 'unsupported admission/readmission dates,' and 'unsupported withdrawal codes.'

With the Auditor of State interim report now out, Harris, who largely feels vindicated (judging by her response in a statement released last week), summed it all up to a faint issue that is far from the gloom and doom many were expecting.

"While there has been widespread talk of millions of questionable changes made to student records within Columbus City Schools, the interim report tells a different story," she said in a statement.

Trying to underscore her belief that this is largely a small problem, she said, of the 4,556 students in the 10 schools probed, only 337 or 7 percent were found with issues.

She also reminded folks of this.

"It is important to note something the auditor of state said, you cannot assume that these schools are representative of the entire district. The schools were selected for audit because they had the highest percentage of test scores "rolled up" to the state."

As for recommendations for how to rectify some of the identified issues, the report called for a system that allows the Ohio Department of Education to improve the independence of its accountability measures. It also called for improved documentation of codes and "timing" in the Education Management Information System (EMIS) involving student withdrawals and enrollments.

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