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CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATION REPORT

Matter: Request by Board of Education for City Schools of Decatur

Investigator: Elizabeth F. Kinsinger; Pereira, Kirby, Kinsinger & Nguyen LLP

Date: October 13, 2026

Investigation Period: June 2026 to present

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The investigator was charged with examining three specific areas of inquiry, principally concerning the Superintendent's use of Podium Studios to host a podcast on behalf of CSD during a period when the Superintendent's husband held a financial interest and ownership in Podium Studios. Following a comprehensive review of the relevant documents, information, and witness interviews, the investigator found no evidence establishing an actionable violation or substantiating any of the three areas of inquiry. The investigation therefore concludes that none of the allegations under review were substantiated, and there is no evidentiary basis for further action with respect to these matters.

II. SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION

Inquiry 1: Have any CSD resources been deployed to give any benefit to Jason Whitaker or Podium Studios, LLC?.

Inquiry 2: Was the use of Podium Studios for the Superintendent's podcast without disclosing Jason Whitaker's affiliation with Podium a violation of Section 2.12 of the Superintendent's contract?

Inquiry 3: Whether the Superintendent knew at the time of the public comment on June 2, 2026, that Crystal Baptiste and Jerome Fitz did not meet the requirements to speak at public comment? If so, did she arrange (or was she aware of an arrangement) to have Crystal Baptiste and Jerome Fitz speak on her behalf despite knowing that they did not meet the requirements to speak at public comment?

III. INVESTIGATIVE METHODOLOGY

The investigator began with a preliminary document review. Interviews were then conducted with all 5 board members. Next, an interview was conducted with Dr. Whitaker; her legal counsel was also present. Interviews were then conducted with relevant District staff members. Finally, the investigator reviewed materials from various outside sources, including Podium Studios. All documentary evidence and artifacts provided by the District, staff, Board Members, and Dr. Whitaker were considered in the investigation.

In order to solicit credible statements from interviewees, staff were advised the investigation was confidential and that District policies prohibit retaliation for participation in the investigation. Staff were further informed that in the event a written report was finalized, their names would be listed as having participated, but individual statements would not be attributed to them, except where expressly required for thoroughness of the investigation.

The investigator conducted interviews with:

1. Board Chair Dr. Carmen Sulton
2. Board Vice Chair Hans Utz
3. Board Member James Herndon
4. Board Member Tracey Anderson
5. Board Member Lorraine Irier
6. Superintendent Dr. Gyimah Whitaker
7. James Brown, Director of Safety and Security
8. Courtney Burnett, Community and Legislative Affairs Coordinator
9. Melinda Williams, Coordinator to Office of Superintendent
10. Eston Melton, former Chief Information Officer (IT)
11. Lonita Broome, Chief Financial Officer
12. Sydney DuPriest, Communications Director
13. Mikkal Murunga, Chief Communications Officer
14. Paris Hardnett, Communications Coordinator

Key documents/artifacts the investigator reviewed:

See Appendix A for a full listing of all documents/artifacts

1. Superintendent Dr. Whitaker's Contract
2. All communications to/from Podium Studios and CSD including relevant custodians
3. Donation Forms for Podium Studios
4. Documentation of payments to Podium Studios
5. Select Podcast recordings of CSD Words with Dr. Whitaker
6. Google sign up form for Board meetings
7. Reimbursement, expense, and p-card manuals/procedures July 1, 2023 to present
8. Personnel manuals in effect July 1, 2023 to present
9. Board Policies

Investigation limitations:

No limitations were placed on the information requested by the investigator from either CSD or Dr. Whitaker. All requests for documents or information were complied with. All District staff / former staff cooperated in the interview process.

IV. BACKGROUND

The Superintendent, Dr. Whitaker, has hosted a podcast, CSD Words with Dr. Whitaker, since her inception in the role in 2023. When Dr. Whitaker first interviewed with CSD, she was requested to present on 3 topics discussing the major tenets of a 90-day entry plan. One topic was communication, specifically, "What structure and strategies would you facilitate to professionalize communications, especially during the first 90 days?" Dr. Whitaker included the intent to host a podcast similar to what she had participated in as an employee of Fulton County Schools. This was realized within the first 90 days of Dr. Whitaker's tenure with the District. The podcast is professionally produced and has won a Merit Award from the National School Public Relations Association.

In late May 2026, reports surfaced that the podcast was hosted at a studio in Marietta in which the Superintendent's husband may have had a financial interest. Concerns arose among community members/stakeholders and Board members that a conflict of interest may exist. As this was occurring, various social media reports/emails came to the attention of the Board inquiring about reputational harm to the District because of the connection to the Superintendent's husband.

Further concerns were raised regarding the content of a separate podcast hosted by the Superintendent's husband which espoused views not in alignment with Board policy/reputation. This was not within the scope of the investigation.

V. FACTUAL FINDINGS

A. Inquiry 1: Have any CSD resources been deployed to give any benefit to Jason Whitaker or Podium Studios, LLC?

Relevant evidence:

a. *Who owned Podium Studios, LLC between July 1, 2023 and the present?*

Jason Whitaker and Devin Smith formed Podium Studios LLC in July of 2023. Jason Whitaker's interest in Podium Studios ended on March 28, 2025, upon execution of a Business Partner Buyout Agreement.

b. *If Jason Whitaker was an owner, what time frame did he have an ownership?*

From its inception in July of 2023 until March 28, 2025, upon execution of a Business Partner Buyout Agreement.

c. *What was the process used to select Podium Studios for the Superintendent's podcast?*

Podium Studios was selected because it was available at no cost to the District and had a high-quality product. According to Dr. Whitaker, she was charged to professionalize communications and the podcast was one of the measures implemented.

d. How was it decided to continue using Podium Studios for the Superintendent's podcast?

The Superintendent elected to continue using Podium Studios to maintain continuity and the high-quality of the production.

e. Did any CSD money exchange hands for the use of Podium Studios facility and/or equipment?

No. District records do not reflect any payments to Podium Studios.

District records do not reflect any reimbursement involving Podium Studios. District records do not reflect any reimbursement or mileage associated with travel to Podium Studios

f. Did Jason Whitaker or Podium Studios, LLC receive any benefit, financial, or otherwise for the Superintendent's use of the studio?

No. There were no payments by CSD for use of the studio. Further, all interviewees with relevant information confirmed that Podium Studios was not "thanked" or recognized as a donor for the utilization of the studio. There is no reference to Podium Studios in the individual podcast recordings or shared on any of the methods of podcast distribution (YouTube, website, newsletter).

g. Did Podium Studios receive any non-monetary benefit from the Superintendent holding her podcast there? (e.g. tax write off, promotion of the company using CSD logo/advertisement)?

Tax records are confidential so the investigator was unable to confirm whether or not a tax write off occurred. However, Dr. Whitaker reported that no tax write off was taken by Mr. Whitaker on behalf of Podium Studios.

There are two Instagram posts by "podiumatl" from September 30, 2023 . One states "Welcome to the @cityschoolsofdecatur team. Recorded their first podcast this weekend" with a picture of CSD staff members. This post has 5 "likes." The second does not specifically reference CSD, in the caption or hashtags, but does contain two pictures of CSD staff members in which the "All in Decatur" logo can be seen. This post has 13 "likes."

To the extent these Instagram posts are considered a "benefit," it is de minimis at best and the investigator was unable to locate any further promotion of the company utilizing the CSD name or logo. These posts are similar to one from "cfadecatur" congratulating Decatur High School's teacher of the year which had 55 "likes" on May 10, 2026.

The investigator requested a list of references and clients from Podium Studios, City Schools of Decatur was not included in the list.

h. *Were any employees of the school district , or Dr. Whitaker, at Podium Studios during work hours?*

Yes, a majority of the podcasts were recorded at Podium Studios during work hours. All interviewees with relevant knowledge stated this was a production on behalf of CSD.

i. *If Podium Studios received money for the Superintendent's use of the facility or equipment, what pot of money was the payment made from? (a third party, the Superintendent's personal funds, reimbursement to the Superintendent for non-travel related expenses per her contract)?*

Initially, Podium Studios did not receive any money and the services were donated as recorded on a Finance Department Donation form for each school year. The Superintendent paid out of her personal funds beginning in August of 2025. Bank records reflect these payments for each session, with the exception of one month where she reportedly used a gift card. The Superintendent's P-Card statement for her tenure with CSD does not reflect any payments to Podium Studios.

Email correspondence from Devin Smith of Podium Studios in August 2025 acknowledges Dr. Whitaker is paying out of her own pocket and that CSD does not pay for the services of Podium Studios.

j. *If the Superintendent paid Podium from her own funds, did this payment constitute a conflict of interest?*

No, at the time the Superintendent paid Podium from her personal funds, Jason Whitaker no longer had an ownership or financial interest in Podium Studios. Dr. Whitaker asserts she made the payments from her personal funds to avoid the appearance of impropriety of using CSD funds because of Mr. Whitaker's prior ownership interest.

Credibility/reliability:

Credible. Documentary evidence supports the finding that no financial transactions occurred between Podium Studios and CSD or any of its employees. Donation forms exist for each school year when donated services were provided. Bank records exist for each month the Superintendent paid for the use of Podium Studios (with the exception of one month when she utilized a gift card).

Mr. Whitaker's relationship/ownership interest with Podium Studios was not a secret. Multiple staff members who were familiar with the podcast were aware that Podium Studios was being utilized because it was available for free to the District.

Multiple staff members described Superintendent Whitaker as a professional leader with a theme of transparency and service to children, with one stating she was "a leader of impeccable conscience."

One staff member raised a concern that the opportunity to produce the podcast had not been provided to CSD students or staff. However, the consensus among staff was that CSD does not

currently have the capability to produce a podcast to the same professional level from an audio/visual and editing perspective.

Finding: Unsubstantiated

Basis:

No CSD resources have been deployed to give benefit to Jason Whitaker or Podium Studios.

Donors are handled separately from vendors. Vendors require a payment set up in the system to process payments. While the vendor form has a place to indicate familial relationship, the donor form does not.

There is no policy which prohibits individuals from donating to the District based on relationship with employees of CSD.

The investigator requested a list of references and clients from Podium Studios, City Schools of Decatur was not included in the list.

B. Inquiry 2: Was the use of Podium Studios for the Superintendent's podcast without disclosing Jason Whitaker's affiliation with Podium a violation of Section 2.12 of the Superintendent's contract?

Relevant evidence:

The Superintendent's contract provides in relevant portion, "2.12 Superintendent shall promptly notify the Board of issues which could result in potential financial or reputational exposure to the district."

This inquiry is premised on an inappropriate financial relationship stemming from the use of Podium Studios. However, evidence does not substantiate an inappropriate financial relationship – see Inquiry 1 above.

While the Superintendent did not directly notify the Board of Jason Whitaker's affiliation with Podium Studios, at least two board members saw him at a podcast recording session.

Jason Whitaker's affiliation with Podium Studios was disclosed to a number of individuals including the Chief Financial Officer and Chief Communications Officer. There is no evidence this information was withheld or kept a secret.

Podium studios completed a donation form for school years FY 2023, 2024, and 2025.

No District funds were utilized to pay Podium studios at any time.

After Mr. Whitaker's interest in Podium Studios ceased in May 2025, Dr. Whitaker personally paid Podium Studios for use of the podcast studio.

Credibility/reliability:

Several district staff members reported they were aware of Mr. Whitaker's affiliation from the outset as this was the result of having a free location to host the podcast. Mr. Whitaker was present at some of the recording sessions.

Finding: Unsubstantiated

Basis:

The podcast was hosted at Podium Studios for three (3) school years without incident.

Donation forms were submitted each school year by Podium Studios.

Dissolution began in 2024 and after March 2025, Jason Whitaker was no longer affiliated with Podium Studios.

As to concerns that Mr. Whitaker's personal podcast was also hosted at Podium Studios, this is unverified. Mr. Whitaker's podcast does not appear to be hosted in the same studio based on review of the set up and podcast studio (picture evidence). Further, according to Dr. Whitaker, Mr. Whitaker records his personal podcast in a home studio and did not and does not utilize any Podium Studios resources to produce his podcast.

Finally, examples of other professional organizations/businesses that have utilized Podium Studios include: Georgia Trial Lawyers Association (GTLA); Ashby Thelen Lowry (ATL Law); Your Retirement Coach/Nic Yeomans; John Brown/Fred Fuller – Account Management Tactical Guide.

C. Inquiry 3: Whether the Superintendent knew at the time of the public comment on June 2, 2026, that Crystal Baptiste and Jerome Fitz did not meet the requirements to speak at public comment? If so, did she arrange (or was she aware of an arrangement) to have Crystal Baptiste and Jerome Fitz speak on her behalf despite knowing that they did not meet the requirements to speak at public comment?

Relevant evidence:

The District has a public comment period for each regular Board Meeting. Members of the public are required to sign up no later than one hour prior to the comment period (by 5:30pm). Sign up is available on-line in advance of the meeting, and via computer kiosk at the Board meeting. Sign up is completed via a Google Form. Individuals self-report on their eligibility to participate in public comment; there is no independent verification of this information.

The Google form since October 2023 reflects 9 times when an individual who does not have a City Schools of Decatur zip code signed up and spoke at the meeting.

According to all interviewees, no individual has ever been stopped from participation in public comment prior to speaking. Staff do not undertake any verification or research into the information speakers submit in the Google form.

As is the District's standard practice, the Board Chair provided the following introduction to the public comment period on June 2, 2026:

> The following information is included in the Board Policy Manual, and members of the public also acknowledge this information when they sign up to speak. This serves as a reminder for all speakers and members of the audience. **The opportunity to address the board during Public Comment is limited to district parents, students, residents, employees, businesses, and organizations.** Persons wishing to address the board during Public Comment must sign up by 5:30 p.m., and in doing so will be asked to state their connection to CSD and/or the City of Decatur.
>
> To allow time for the board's other business, Public Comment will ordinarily be limited to one hour or 20 speakers. At the board's discretion, the Public Comment period may be extended for a specified amount of time or a specific number of additional speakers
>
> The time limit for all speakers will be three minutes. Persons speaking during Public Comment will not be permitted to "yield the floor" or "transfer" unused time to other speakers. Comments during Public Comment should be addressed to the board as a body, and not to any individual board members. **At the chair's discretion, persons violating this policy may be asked to step down.**
>
> Speakers should be courteous and professional. Speakers are not to list **complaints** about specific personnel or individuals connected with the District in a public session. The board strictly prohibits abusive language, threats, comments, jeers, applause, or shouts from the floor. Disruptive persons will be asked to leave the meeting room. **The chair may terminate public comments that are profane, vulgar, defamatory, or disruptive.** If any speaker's comments begin to verge into areas of hate speech or defamation, **I will have to ask the speaker to end their comments. Speakers may not address confidential student or personnel matters, but may submit such concerns to the superintendent in writing.** Members of the board will not address persons presenting Public Comment or speak to the substance of any comments made during Public Comment. Instead, a member of the administrative team will follow up with persons speaking at the Board meeting.

Crystal Baptiste completed the Google sign up form and selected the designation of "Designated representative of a recognized organization in the City of Decatur." She indicated the topic as "Dr. Whitaker remaining as Superintendent."

Jerome Fitz completed the Google sign up form and selected the designation of "Resident of the City of Decatur." He indicated the topic as "I would like to address the issue with the superintendent."

Dr. Whitaker denies knowledge of either individual, Crystal Baptiste or Jerome Fitz. She reports that she does not know these individuals and did not arrange for their appearance or comment at

the June 2 meeting. She denies knowing they would appear, or what their remarks would be outside of what was recorded on the Google sign up form.

At the meeting, the two individuals did not name Dr. Whitaker in their remarks. Ms. Baptiste spoke about the ECLC and at the end briefly referenced a podcast and first amendment rights. Mr. Fitz spoke about "the podcast" and did state, "no one should be fired for their husband's" comments.

Two other speakers were identified as non-resident via their addresses and were allowed to speak at this same meeting. Like Ms. Baptiste, they selected the designation of "Designated representative of a recognized organization in the City of Decatur." One of these speakers also referenced "the podcast."

Another speaker listed, "issues with the superintendent" as the topic and was allowed to speak.

Credibility/reliability:

Credible. Evidence is consistent that no quality control check is provided for any potential public commenter.

Evidence is consistent that no individual has ever been prohibited from participating in public comment before beginning their remarks.

The Investigator was unable to confirm with the two individuals why they attended the meeting. However, the investigator was able to review information provided on social media which did not substantiate a personal relationship between the Superintendent and the two individuals. Evidence does support a finding that Dr. Whitaker's husband encouraged attendance at the Board meeting and for individuals to speak on behalf of his wife.

Finding: Unsubstantiated. There is no evidence that the Superintendent arranged or was aware, prior to the meeting, that either speaker would be present or the substance of their comments.

Basis: Dr. Whitaker does not know either individual and did not undertake efforts to have them attend the meeting.

Further, and perhaps more critical, according to all interviewees, no individual has ever been stopped from participation in public comment prior to speaking. Staff do not undertake any verification or research into the information speakers submit in the Google form. While CSD has a procedure that states "Public Comment is limited to district parents, students, residents, employees, businesses, and organizations" it appears this has never been enforced and there is inadequate time for staff to conduct any sort of investigation into the veracity of the information provided on the Google sign up form prior to the public comment period.

The policy and introductory remarks provide that the Board Chair will ask the speaker to end their remarks should they not follow the stated guidelines. Thus, if the comments at the time of the speech did not meet CSD guidelines, the Board Chair would be responsible for ending the

remarks. [Note, there was evidence that on some occasions the Board's counsel would speak up if public comment veered into confidential personnel or student matters] Email correspondence on June 3, 2026, by the Board chair reflects, "She also didn't talk about a personnel matter in real time. I certainly would have stopped her if so." The Board chair did stop another speaker on this date when comments veered into personnel/student matters.

VI. APPLICABLE POLICIES/STANDARDS

1. Board Public Comment
2. Superintendent Contract
3. Employee Handbook
4. Purchasing/Vendor Policy/Procedures
5. Board Policy BAC

VII. CONCLUSIONS

1. Allegation 1: There is insufficient evidence to support a finding that any CSD resources have been deployed to give any benefit to Jason Whitaker or Podium Studios, LLC.

2. Allegation 2: There is insufficient evidence to support a finding that the use of Podium Studios for the podcast without disclosing Jason Whitaker's affiliation with Podium constitutes a violation of Section 2.12 of the Superintendent's Contract.

3. Allegation 3: There is insufficient evidence to support a finding that Dr. Whitaker knew at the time of public comment on June 2, 2026, that Crystal Baptiste and Jerome Fitz did not meet the requirements to speak at public comment.

There is insufficient evidence to support a finding that Dr. Whitaker was aware that either individual did not meet the requirements to speak at public comment at the time of their speech and/or that Dr. Whitaker arranged to have them speak at the meeting.

IX. APPENDICES

Appendix A — Evidence/Artifact Index

Submitted by: Elizabeth Kinsinger

Elizabeth F. Kinsinger

Appendix A — Evidence/Artifact Index – Materials Reviewed

1. Superintendent Dr. Whitaker's Contract
2. All communications to/from Podium Studios and CSD including relevant custodians
3. Donation Forms for Podium Studios
4. Documentation of payments/receipts to/from Podium Studios by Dr. Whitaker
5. P-Card record for Dr. Whitaker, 2023-present
6. Select Podcast recordings of CSD Words with Dr. Whitaker
7. Reimbursement, expense, and p-card manuals/procedures July 1, 2023 to present
8. Personnel manuals in effect July 1, 2023 to present
9. Board Policies, including Board Policy BAC: Equity
10. Georgia Corporations Business Information for Podium Studios 23157968
11. Business Partner Buyout Agreement – Podium Studios
12. August 11, 2026 email Smith to Whitaker
13. GSBA March 1, 2023 interview letter to Dr. Whitaker
14. Superintendent Candidate information from Dr. Whitaker (re: communications)
15. 90-day Review, October 10, 2023
16. Records of studio recordings at Podium Studios/date/time/podcast interviewees
17. NSPRA Merit Award
18. CSD 2024-25 and 2025-26 milestones
19. CSD Reimbursements for all Board members, interviewees, and staff who appeared on podcast
20. Finance Narrative
21. 2025 Finance Audit Report
22. Google Form for public comment sign up - blank
23. Google Form for October 2023 to present reflecting individuals who signed up for public comment
24. May 24, 2026 Media Advisory
25. Board Script 6.2.26
26. Recording of June 6, 2026 public comments (Fitz/Baptiste)
27. Photographs of Podium Studios
28. Photographs of JWhit podcast studio recording facilities
29. Multiple Emails from CSD parents/stakeholders
30. Multiple intra-Board emails regarding the matters of inquiry

Also reviewed for context, though not made part of findings:

1. News articles from May/June 2026 regarding the Superintendent/Podcast investigation
2. June 2, 2026 surveillance footage of meeting exits
3. Incident statements from June 2, 2026
4. Select JWhit podcast recordings/screen captures

5. C. Baptiste June 3, 2026 podcast
6. SupDrWhitaker website