

Letter from Superintendent Reid to Virginia Secretary of Education 8/29/23

By Dr. Michelle C. Reid

Superintendent's Messages

AUGUST 29, 2023

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Aimee Rogstad Guidera, Secretary of Education
Commonwealth of Virginia
Patrick Henry Building
1111 East Broad Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Dear Secretary Guidera,

In concert with our Division Counsel John Foster, I am writing to follow up on our initial response to your March 9, 2023 letter.

In that letter, you make reference to the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology ("TJHSST") and to the TJHSST Partnership Fund ("TJ Fund"). The TJ Fund is a separate and independent 501(c)(3) entity, which is not overseen by FCPS, is funded entirely through charitable donations, and whose purpose is to "[s]upport the unique learning opportunities, specialized curriculum and innovative research experiences available for TJ students" and to "[p]rovide opportunities for alumni to remain connected through increased engagement opportunities."^[1] Your letter poses several questions that appear to have been prompted by media reports relating to past donations to the TJ Fund by alleged Chinese Communist Party ("CCP")-linked entities.

At the outset, let me note that we acknowledge your questions. Published reports about donations to FCPS schools from alleged CCP-linked entities understandably pique public curiosity. FCPS believes the public—including parents of present and past TJHSST students—has a right to know the facts relating to this issue, which is why we have chosen to post this response to your March 9 letter on the Division’s website.

As discussed further below, the last of the relationships you have inquired about ended in 2021, and the last donation the Fund received from any China-based entity was six years ago, in 2017.

Upon receiving your letter, I directed our Division Counsel to lead and coordinate a review. Recognizing the importance of providing well-informed, accurate responses, he has been working for several months now in cooperation with the TJ Fund’s staff and representatives to gather needed information and data relevant to your questions. This has included collection and review of various documents and communications, interviews with persons knowledgeable about past affiliations between the TJ Fund and China-based educational institutions, and review of various relevant accounting records. The fact that the TJ Fund donor relationships you have inquired about were terminated years ago and those most knowledgeable about such relationships are no longer affiliated with the Fund or FCPS is another reason why our work has taken several months. To assist with this, FCPS has retained help from outside legal counsel and from an outside accounting firm. Although we are continuing to gather and review information, we do not expect that continuing review to have any bearing upon the questions you have posed or the responses provided below. As noted, the TJ Fund has cooperated with our review and we have reported below the conclusions we reached after considering information provided by the TJ Fund.

Before responding to your specific questions, we have provided further background information below.

Background

The geopolitical relationship between the United States and China has changed significantly over the past several years, and such changes have led the U.S. government, U.S. corporations, and U.S. colleges and universities, among others, to increasingly withdraw from prior connections and interactions with China, specifically from alleged CCP-linked entities. The TJ Fund's termination of past relationships with alleged CCP-linked entities mirrors this broader trend.

The TJ Fund in the past had relationships with three China-based entities. The TJ Fund entered a formal relationship with Tsinghua University High School ("Tsinghua") in April 2014; that relationship concluded in late 2018. The TJ Fund entered a formal relationship with the Ameson Education and Cultural Exchange Foundation ("Ameson") in December 2014; that relationship concluded in late 2018. The TJ Fund entered a formal relationship with Shirble Department Store Holdings (China) Limited ("Shirble") in December 2016; that relationship concluded effective March 1, 2021.

Some TJHSST educators were also involved in these relationships, primarily by interacting with Chinese educators in much the same way as TJHSST teachers frequently interact with educators from various other schools located both in the U.S. and abroad. Like educators at other elite schools throughout the United States—including other leading private and public STEM high schools—TJHSST educators routinely collaborate with educators at other local, national, and international schools. For example, TJHSST educators collaborate with other educators through the National Consortium of Secondary STEM Schools, of which TJHSST is a member and in which Tsinghua has also participated. Similarly, TJHSST for many years hosted the Jefferson/Overseas Technology Institute ("JOSTI"), an annual five-day technology training experience for overseas educators sponsored by TJHSST and the Office of Overseas Schools, U.S. Department of State.

As noted, sensitivities regarding relationships with China-based entities, have increased in recent years. However, the TJ Fund from the outset followed a cautious approach to these relationships. At the time that it entered into the first of these relationships with Tsinghua in 2014, the Executive Director of the TJ Fund reached out to contacts with the U.S. State Department seeking advice. In that outreach, the TJ Fund representative informed the State Department that the Fund was "proceeding cautiously" and was seeking to "understand from all angles how this partnership

might work and impact our school.” When the Fund later drew close to finalizing its relationship with Tsinghua, the Fund’s representative reached out again asking if a State Department representative might wish to attend an upcoming signing ceremony. It does not appear that any State Department official was able to attend, although a State Department representative did respond, stating: “Congratulations to Thomas Jefferson on forming a partnership with the Tsinghua University network of schools!”

These communications are reflective of the different attitudes that prevailed in that time period, including within U.S. government agencies and private U.S. corporations.

Responses to Questions

Your March 9 letter posed five questions. FCPS’s responses are provided below.

1. Funds Received from Alleged CCP-Linked Entities

You asked how much money the TJ Fund, since its inception, received from these entities. According to donor records kept by the TJ Fund, the total amount contributed to the Fund by these entities was \$3.6 million. I have provided a breakdown below of the total received from each entity, and for each entity I have also noted the date of the last donation received, as reflected in the TJ Fund’s centralized donor records.

Tsinghua: \$1.2 million; last contribution received June 7, 2017

Ameson: \$900,000; last contribution received December 21, 2017

Shirble: \$1.5 million; last contribution received November 8, 2017

2. Use of Funds Received from Alleged CCP-Linked Entities

You asked for what purposes the donated funds were used. These donations were made on an unrestricted basis and contributed to the Fund’s general operational accounts. Over the relevant period, the TJ Fund made a variety of uses of these and

other unrestricted donations from a broad range of donors. A portion of the funding was used to support the costs of operating the TJ Fund and paying its administrative staff. The majority of the funding was used to support gifts and grants to TJHSST to finance investments in school renovations, laboratory equipment, and enhanced facilities. Some portion of the funding was also used for travel expenses and/or stipends paid to TJHSST staff who traveled to China to visit these educational institutions or otherwise contributed to the relationships outside of school hours.

3. Influence Over Instructional Materials or Content

You asked whether any of the alleged CCP-linked donors to the TJ Fund provided guidance, influence, or instructional materials related to content taught at TJHSST. As described above, TJHSST teachers collaborated with teachers from some of the China-based entities much in the same way that TJHSST teachers have collaborated with educators from other schools with similar STEM-focused educational missions in the U.S. and overseas. These collaborations included sharing of course syllabi and curriculum information. We have seen no indication that these limited information exchanges had any influence on the content of material taught at TJHSST.

4. Provision of Instructional Materials to Alleged CCP-Linked Entities

You asked whether instructional materials, class schedules, and individual performance or evaluation indicators were provided to the alleged CCP-linked entities that made contributions to the TJ Fund. During the pendency of these relationships, TJHSST staff did meet and share information with educators in the China-based schools. The information shared included syllabi, textbooks, and other course materials, although much or all of the information shared was publicly available, and the same type of information is commonly shared among educators at elite schools—including, as noted above, through international programs such as JOSTI.

5. Sharing of Non-Public Student Information

You asked whether any non-public student information, individual or in the aggregate, was provided to the alleged CCP-linked entities. TJHSST staff, through the TJ Fund, only shared very limited information with their Chinese counterparts that in any way involved or originated from TJHSST students. One example involved the

sharing of sample senior research projects or summaries of such projects, although the TJ Fund's practice was to redact the name of any student whose work was shared. We are unaware of any instance in which personally identifiable student information was shared with alleged CCP-linked entities.

Finally, your letter also requests that I direct that the Division "cut ties with CCP-linked partners." With the caveat that we are not commenting here on whether any of the three Chinese institutions referenced above has or ever had CCP links, as explained above the last of the TJ affiliations with alleged CCP-linked entities expired in 2021, and the last donation from any such entity to the TJ Fund, as reflected in the TJ Fund's centralized donor records, was six years ago, in 2017. Further, while we are not aware of any other FCPS schools with formal or informal ties to CCP-linked entities, I am providing an annual administrative directive on this subject. I would also like to inform you that FCPS recently finalized and executed a Memorandum of Understanding ("MOU") with the TJ Fund, which sets forth guidelines and parameters for this relationship going forward. That MOU provides that the TJ Fund will not accept or solicit donations from any foreign entity without my express written consent.

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Thank you for your interest. We hope that you find this information helpful and responsive to the questions presented in your March 9 letter. The information provided above reflects our careful review of the relevant facts and records, and we will provide you with any additional information as appropriate.

In FCPS, we believe diverse perspectives and cultures foster enriching learning experiences for all our students. This educational approach helps each and every student to be successful in our global society as outlined in the FCPS Portrait of a Graduate.

I look forward to continuing to support our 182,000 students this school year and working with you and your colleagues to create a strong educational experience for our community.

Sincerely,

Dr. Michelle C. Reid, Superintendent

cc: John Foster, Division Counsel

^[1] <https://www.tjpartnershipfund.org/> <<https://www.tjpartnershipfund.org/>>