



Great Vision Great Coverage

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Baltimore County Public Schools Faces Catastrophic Ransomware Attack

By Logan Dubel



One month after a ransomware attack struck BCPS, many questions remain unanswered.

What happened? That is the million-dollar question that Baltimore County Public Schools will likely not be able to answer, at least publicly, for quite some time. As the school system works to recover data and restore total functionality, controversies are heating up over whether the attack was preventable and where we go from here.

A cyberattack right before Thanksgiving? Only in 2020. Problems first appeared during the virtual Board of Education meeting on November 24, when screens suddenly turned blue and began displaying corrupted files. When logging into BCPS One and Schoology on the morning of November 25, administrators, teachers, and 115,000 students realized that something was not right. Instead of seeing their assignments for the day and links to the Google Meet platform, students were greeted with error messages. Naturally, most students started texting their friends and checking social media to see if the outage was widespread. Next, Facebook and Twitter began lighting up with messages from teachers and BCPS officials, announcing that classes were cancelled due to a hack of the system. Students began to receive word that they should not turn on their computers, access school Google accounts, or use the Schoology app on their phones.

Despite the firestorm of messages across the Internet, some students were still un-

ware of the incident, yet knew that something was wrong. For a short time, there was no official message from BCPS because they themselves could not get online, showing just how extensive the attack was. By 9:30 a.m., reports indicated that this was indeed a ransomware attack, affecting the entire technological infrastructure.

Charles Herndon, a BCPS communications official, addressed the magnitude of the incident. "There isn't a part of the school system that hasn't been affected by this attack. Keep in mind that BCPS is a system of more than 115,000 students, 20,000 employees, and the 25th largest school district in the nation, so it was a crippling attack of a catastrophic nature," Herndon explained. "That said, it is difficult to know precisely which systems were impacted - and how deeply - due to the nature of an attack like this. Part of the recovery involves days, weeks, and even months of discovering just which systems were affected, and how badly they were affected. We continue to work through that process."

Despite this major blow to online learning, after a few days of troubleshooting, students returned to live Google Meet sessions and could access Schoology. Those with infected devices, particularly teachers, had the opportunity to trade them in, and everyone was instructed to complete confidence checks. Besides the important learning websites, www.bcps.org remains damaged. The center of the system's internet presence appears noticeably different, and items as basic as the school calendar are still missing. In addition, students and teachers are now in the midst of a device exchange and reimaging process, which will undoubtedly serve as another burden.

While it seems as though the major problem is solved, the truth is that the end is nowhere in sight for top BCPS officials. In fact, the retribution is just beginning. Kathleen Causey, Chair of the Baltimore County Board of Education, called the situation "very disturbing." There is no doubt that

the act is despicable. The FBI, the Baltimore County Police Department, and other agencies will continue to search for answers, and details about their findings may take quite some time to become available. One of the most popular questions is if BCPS did or did not pay ransom to hackers. Experts advised against conforming to their demands, claiming that it would enable them to pursue similar cyber breaches. Since the school community may never get some of those desperate questions answered, people are shifting the focus to the everyday impact of the attack. The issue is becoming more about the loss of files and months of work and whether this entire situation was preventable.

In a striking report from the Office of Legislative Audits at the Maryland General Assembly, released just days before the attack, an evaluation committee revealed that Baltimore County Public Schools had serious holes in its system. According to the review, "significant risks existed within BCPS' computer network. For example, monitoring of security activities over critical systems was not sufficient, and its computer network was not properly secured." Specifically, 26 publicly accessible servers were not isolated in a separate network, leaving them vulnerable to intrusions. Although it is unknown whether the issues identified within the report directly caused the ransomware incident, the findings of auditors are quite alarming.

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To make matters worse, a struggle is now ensuing between Superintendent Darryl Williams and Baltimore County Executive Johnny Olszewski. On December 11, Olszewski sent a letter to Williams ripping apart BCPS' poor efforts and lack of cooperation in the investigation. He criticized the district's insufficient communication and refusal to use resources such as the Maryland Emergency Management Agency (MEMA). Additionally, Olszewski claimed that BCPS is not cooperating with the county police. He added, "My primary concern is the well-being of our students, educators, and families. They deserve better coordination and clearer communication in this situation."

Williams responded with a much different interpretation of his response to the ransomware attack and refuted Olszewski's assertion that BCPS is not complying with other agencies or withholding information. With these two important leaders at odds, finding a long-term solution to improve online security is even more challenging. By December 15, school officials put out a press release commending themselves and Williams for their "resilient" response. Among those praising Williams' leadership was Board of Education of Baltimore County Chair, Makeda Scott. "I could not be more proud of Superintendent (Darryl L.) Williams, his professional and talented team, and of all of our dedicated educators across Baltimore County who are weather-

ing a combination of challenges that would buckle many other school systems," said Scott. "Dr. Williams' leadership has brought out the best in each of us whose first priority are the children of our community, and I am confident that with him, our Board, and 'Team BCPS' leading the way, we can handle any crisis and overcome any obstacle that stands in the way of student success." The memo referenced the district's reliance on federal, state, and local authorities, which Olszewski has disputed.

On all fronts, the effects of the cyberattack will remain for quite some time. Charles Herndon of BCPS could not provide an exact time frame, but he believes it will be "a while." He also pointed to other school systems facing similar situations as a reference and mentioned some of the talented and powerful teams tackling the issue. "We have not been given a timetable for a full recovery, but the experiences of other school systems that have weathered similar attacks are that the recovery process may be weeks or months depending on the severity of the attack," Herndon said. "I have no idea if our situation will take that long or if it will be resolved more quickly - we have a wonderful team of IT experts and professionals working on this as well as the resources of local, state, and federal IT and law enforcement resources - but the expectation is that we will be at this for a while yet and that we all have to be patient, understanding, and sup-

portive of our students, their families, our amazing teachers, and all those who are having to deal not only with the pandemic and virtual learning but this ransomware attack on top of everything else."

Nonetheless, this is shaping up to be another difficult situation putting county schools under intense scrutiny from parents, students, teachers, and even colleagues in county government. Moving forward, especially in the virtual world, steps must and will be taken to ensure that no one can infiltrate the system and that BCPS is not the victim of another vicious cyberattack.



BCPS Superintendent Darryl Williams is facing backlash from County Executive Johnny Olszewski.

Franklin Teachers and Administrators Recover from Ransomware Attack

By Bari Weinstein

The Franklin community is now aware of the ransomware attack on BCPS right before Thanksgiving break. Many Franklin High teachers, staff, and administrators were affected. I talked to both a teacher who was affected and an administrator who has been on the front line at school helping as much as he can. Both said that it was a lot.

Assistant Principal O'Connell said, "I found out from social media, and alerted the team. They thought it was a joke. Then, we worked together to get the word out to others. Shock was the main emotion. Communication needed to get out as fast as possible without damaging our own devices." Teachers were instructed on Wednesday morning, November 25, to stay off their device until further notice.

It is challenging to get news to about 1600 students plus faculty whether we are in school or online. Many people were surprised, shocked, and anxious because of the news. According to Mr. O'Connell, over twenty percent of the faculty was affected. Luckily, teachers from each department were able to help each other out if files were lost.

English teacher Mr. Showalter said, "I found out before I opened my computer. I do not always shut down my computer. My wife told me we did not have school."

On Monday morning after Thanksgiving, teachers found out how to look for evidence of the ransomware on their device at home and were instructed to bring their device to school the next day for a confidence check by staff members of the BCPS Department of Information Technology.

Mr. Showalter said, "I found out that my device was affected, and I took it into school. I thought we were going to have a while before we went back to school. I was incredibly surprised and shocked." Classes resumed the next day.

When asked if he was able to recover everything that was lost, Mr. Showalter said, "I have a Chromebook from the county that school gave me. If I were to lose it all, I would have lost 17 years of files. But I do not know if I lost it all, because I do not have my regular computer back."

"I think throughout, people were just scared about what was going to happen to their devices," said Mr. O'Connell. "The only directions [from the county] were to stay off BCPS devices, and we were lucky because it was Thanksgiving weekend." He said they prevented panic by "getting communication out."

When asked how much damage was caused by the ransomware attack, Mr. O'Connell said, "any Baltimore County platform has been affected. It

just messes things up, because of virtual learning, scheduling, etc."

For those still having device issues, they are struggling to do schoolwork and attend classes online. Mr. O'Connell said, "There are plenty of different layers to it. Everything that is a BCPS platform, we do not have access to. And BCPS partners with Google Meets and Schoology. Student information is inaccessible. If teachers do not have contact with parents for students, it is harder for them to get in touch."

Since no one can use BCPS One at the moment, teachers have been instructed to use only certain programs and access them through new links. Teachers and students are using Schoology, Google Meets, Google Drive, and One Drive.

Some files and programs that were lost to the ransomware have been recovered. Mr. O'Connell said, "most people have things back, but things are popping back up, and it's harder. There are side effects from the ransomware. Teachers tend to collaborate, such as English teachers, and get things because it helps to have others sharing information, such as teachers in this case."

One piece of advice Mr. Showalter gave is something everyone could do. "I have to shut down my computer at the end of the day, and that may save me."

SAT Testing Amidst Covid-19

By Christina Okoli

By now, it has become the norm to wear a mask when going out, which has made masks an essential kept in purses, pockets, or even hanging on the rear-view mirror in the car for safekeeping. BUT, would you wear them during a test?

Covid-19 continues its spread with the number of positive cases rising daily by more than 2,000 in Maryland alone. Schools resorted to online learning to protect the teachers, students, parents, and other school personnel. Even though schools are doing online learning, the PSAT and the SAT are still doing in-person testing. The non-profit organization College Board, that offers the PSAT, SAT, and AP exams, are continuing to let people register for these tests. College Board announced this on their updates about the procedures for registering for the tests and the possibility of testing sites' limited space and unexpected closures that can happen within a day before your expected testing date.

The beginning of the announcement is as follows: "As schools continue to navigate uncertainties due to the coronavirus, the top priorities for College Board are the health and safety of students and educators. All weekend test centers must adhere to local public health guidelines and follow College Board requirements." It goes on to explain that testing centers make individual decisions about capacity and closures.



From College Board's website

If you're worried that there may be a slim chance you could get Covid-19, then be aware that the testing centers are required to follow the CDC and College Board requirements:

- All students and staff are required to wear a mask or protective face covering during an SAT administration. Students won't be allowed in the test center without a mask, which is required for the duration of testing.
- Students must be seated at least 6 feet apart during testing.
- Students must confirm a series of statements prior to entering the test center or testing room.

Students who violate the requirements put in place by their test center or College Board should be dismissed from the test center; if this happens their scores will be canceled, and they won't receive a refund.

From College Board PSAT-Related Assessment and SAT Coronavirus Updates

Before any student enters the center, they go through a screening to verify they are not bringing in anything to jeopardize the safety of others. (see below)

PSAT Alert

January 26 PSAT/NMSQT GRADE 11 STUDENTS ONLY

*FHS Class of 2022
School Counseling Central*

If you haven't registered for the SAT or the PSAT, there's a PSAT available for eleventh graders with the fee covered by BCPS. Transportation that follows the Covid-19 guidelines is also available.

SAT Test Center Covid-19 Safety Screening

When students arrive on test day, and before letting them into a test center, testing staff will administer a short survey before letting students into a test center to determine if a student should be sent home due to sickness. Testing staff will administer this survey verbally to all students, and deny entry to any student who doesn't confirm all the statements below or refuses to answer them.

In the past 14 days, I have not come into close contact (within 6 feet) with someone who has tested positive for covid-19 test or is presumed to have covid-19.

I do not have covid-19 or have reason to believe I have covid-19. Symptoms of covid-19 include cough, fever, chills, muscle pain, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, sore throat, new loss of taste or smell.

To my knowledge, I am not violating any travel restrictions or quarantining requirements.

I agree to wear a mask the entire time I'm at this test center and follow instructions from test center staff, otherwise I will be dismissed.

We have taken measures to help create a safe testing environment; however, it isn't possible to entirely remove the risk of covid-19 exposure. By entering the testing room, you're accepting that risk.

From College Board PSAT-Related Assessment and SAT Coronavirus Updates

What We're Missing Right Now

By Lea Glaser

Since we miss athletics, here is a quick throwback to last years' sports season.



2019 Varsity Field Hockey wins regional championship. Photo by Lea Glaser



Girls Varsity Indoor Track Team lines up for a relay. Photo by Root Exposure Photography



2020 Senior Sire Hopkins playing defense against the opponent with the ball for the Varsity Football Team. Photo by Derek Toney



Boys Varsity Basketball Team on Senior Night. Photo by @franklinhsbasketball on Instagram



Current Junior Campbell Ruffhead setting up the Girls JV Soccer team for a corner kick. Photo by David Glaser



Current Junior Stone Cooper dribbling up the field for the Boys Varsity Soccer Team. Photo by David Glaser



Current Senior Daymon David celebrating after making a great play. Photo by the Baltimore Sun

The Truth Behind a Mild Winter

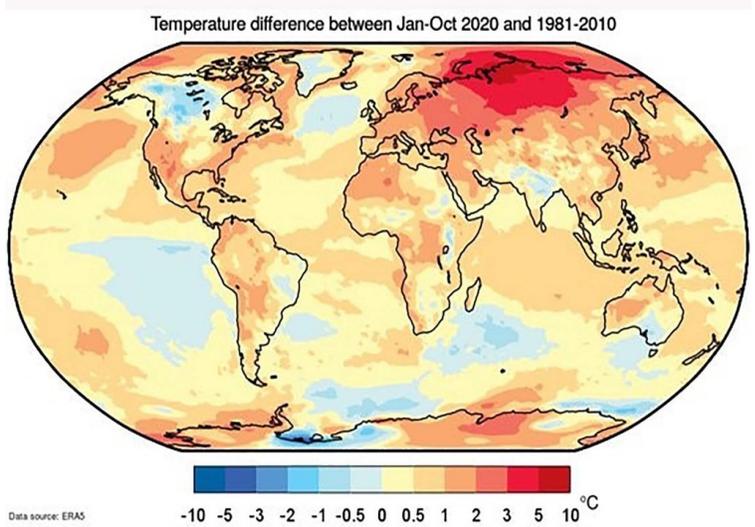
By Simone Tillman

As the holiday season is closing in, people have their fingers crossed for a “White Christmas,” but this year that may be less likely than you’d think. Weather patterns over the last few years have been consistent despite the drastic change in temperature. It is no surprise that this year’s winter will be a mild one, but people can’t help but ask why.

The immediate conclusion to come to is climate change must be the cause, specifically global warming. While this 2020 winter season is a great example of how mild the climate has recently gotten, no singular event can depict whether climate change is at the core of this phenomenon or not. Mild weather this winter hasn’t come out of the blue. “It’s consistent with

the idea that global warming is going on,” said Kevin Trenberth, a senior scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR).

The global average surface temperature has increased by 1.3 degrees Fahrenheit between 1900 and 2000, and this decade



Climate map showing the temperature difference between this year and years past. Taken from <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/12/1079042>



Wintery scene from brucestambaugh.com

has been ranked the warmest on record by the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s State of Climate in 2010 report. This issue has been years in the making, decades even, and it’s not going to go away quickly either. There are many ways to combat global warming, like composting, decreasing natural gas emissions, and decreasing

pollution in general. To achieve any real ground with these tactics would take years, but it’s better to start sooner than later.

While it appears that this year’s winter is following suit with those in recent years past, it isn’t too far-fetched to still expect snow on Christmas morning. The east coast particularly has seen snow already and the temperatures will do nothing but go down from here. Nonetheless, it’s still important to acknowledge these reasons behind climate change and make a genuine effort in its rejuvenation.

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Thanks to Gazette Staff Writers and Contributors:

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