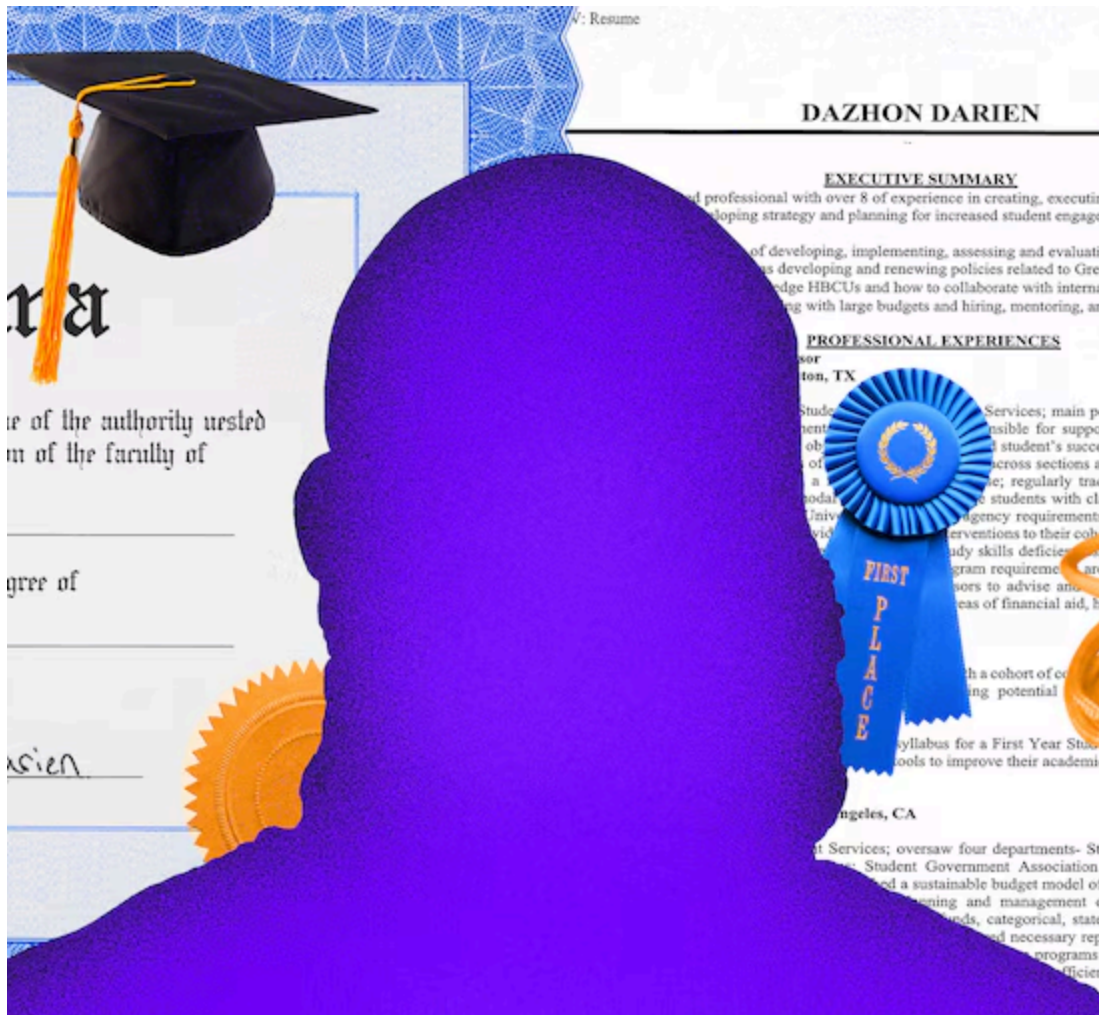


## THE BALTIMORE BANNER

# Florida warned schools about a teacher's fraud. Baltimore County missed the red flags.

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Dazhon Darien, Pikesville High School's former athletic director, stands accused of using AI to fake a racist rant by the school's principal. Since then, he's been found to have repeatedly faked his credentials. (Laila Milevski/The Baltimore Banner. Original images from Getty Images and courtesy of Colorado Mesa University.)

Florida tried to warn other school systems about Dazhon Darien back in 2016.

Thanks to a national clearinghouse for screening teachers, hundreds of school districts would have known to ask more questions before hiring Darien, the high school athletic director who was [arrested in April and accused of framing a Pikesville principal using artificial intelligence](#). Florida's education department flagged the clearinghouse eight years ago that Darien was denied a teaching certificate based on "test or document fraud."

Baltimore County Public Schools didn't get the memo.

When the school district first hired Darien in spring 2023, it didn't have access to the database run by the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education Certification, which has tracked all "adverse action" against licensed educators since 1985, according to Jimmy Adams, the group's executive director.

Baltimore County schools also didn't spot [at least 16 false claims in Darien's job application](#), a pattern of deception he's repeated on applications to at least three other institutions across the country. Baltimore County [school district officials have said a loophole in the hiring process was to blame](#) but have repeatedly declined to explain what it was, or what they've done to close it.

Correspondence obtained through a public records request shows that the Maryland State Department of Education found Florida's warning in February, when Darien applied for a teaching certificate — a credential

he was supposed to have by then. It triggered an investigation that revealed Darien had submitted fraudulent college transcripts on his applications in Baltimore County, just as he'd done in Florida eight years earlier, according to the correspondence.

But the state's investigation didn't start until May, weeks after Darien's arrest.



Dazhon Darien worked as a social studies teacher at Randallstown High School in spring 2023, before he became Pikesville High School's athletic director.

Darien did not answer several requests for comment. Baltimore County Public Schools declined to comment.

Records obtained through a public records request show more troubling information about Darien's departure from a Florida school in October 2015.

The records show he resigned from his job as a paraprofessional — a kind of assistant teacher — at Gibbs High School in St. Petersburg after administrators confronted him about texting a female student.

Among the handwritten notes on a page signed by Principal Reuben Hepburn included:

- “Went up to room @ lunch room dark — girl inside room he is off to the side behind partitions.”

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- “Girl said just having lunch.”

The principal died in 2020. The administrator of the Office of Professional Standards at Pinellas County Schools, John Frank, retired in 2023. He could not be reached for comment.

The Florida school district determined Darien was not eligible to be rehired.

In an email, Isabel Mascareñas, public information officer for Pinellas County Schools, wrote that the system would disclose Darien resigned under investigation if a future employer called for a reference.

Darien did not list the position on the two résumés that he submitted to Baltimore County Public Schools.

Florida’s education department denied Darien a teaching license eight years ago for “attempt[ing] to obtain a teaching certificate by fraudulent means,” according to correspondence about Maryland’s investigation.

That wasn't something he disclosed in his application for a Maryland teaching license, which Darien attested was true under the penalties of perjury, according to the correspondence. The application specifically asks if he "ever had a certificate or license revoked, suspended, voluntarily surrendered, or denied by any state other than Maryland?" Darien answered no.

Baltimore County State's Attorney Scott Shellenberger said his office would examine the issue if the education department brought it to them.

"Because, obviously, perjury is a crime."

A spokesperson for the Maryland's education department said only that it works with legal counsel to decide when contacting law enforcement is appropriate.

The state's education department doesn't provide guidance on hiring, the spokesperson said, but state laws spell out how to properly verify an application and the national clearinghouse exists to add another layer of protection.

"It's not a scientific research database by any means," said Adams. "It's just there to let states know when you get ready to issue a license, check the person first."

Only the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education Certification's 329 members have access to the clearinghouse, and members can only be state licensing agencies, local education agencies and

education preparation providers. Access to the clearinghouse typically costs just a few hundred dollars.

Virginia pays for membership for every school district. In Maryland, the school districts in Anne Arundel, Caroline, Charles, Frederick and Montgomery counties have been members for at least a few years. Baltimore County is Maryland's newest member, signing up July 1.

The association trains its members on how to use the database before issuing a teacher license. It's also a tool for human resources in school districts.

Adams suggests that when an applicant's name shows up in the database, education agencies should verify that it's the same person then contact the state where the action was taken.

If school systems are checking job candidates' references, conducting criminal background checks and running names through the clearinghouse, Adams said it can make a huge difference.

Maryland [law](#) requires school systems to review applicants' employment history "by contacting the employers listed by the applicant" when the job involves direct contact with minors. School systems, though, can set up their own vetting procedures in addition to what's required by law, according to the state education department.

The Baltimore County Public Schools application portal asks for unofficial transcripts and certifications to be



submitted. “Official Transcripts may be requested at the time of hire,” the application states. District officials declined to answer questions about how often it requests official transcripts from the colleges who issue them.

Despite Baltimore County’s apparent oversight of Darien’s fraudulent transcripts, the state places the blame squarely on him.

“Mr. Darien’s failure to disclose the denial of his Florida teaching application when explicitly asked constitutes deliberate concealment and misrepresentation,” the report read. “In doing so, Mr. Darien prevented MSDE from performing its duty to properly screen Maryland teaching applicants and ensure the integrity of teachers in the State.”

## About the Education Hub

This reporting is part of The Banner’s Education Hub, community-funded journalism that provides parents with resources they need to make decisions about how their children learn. [Read more.](#)