

Mrs. Vicki Saviers

January 3, 2015

Mrs. Leslie Fiskien
Little Rock School District
School Board Member, Zone 3
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Mrs. Vicki Saviers
Board Member
Arkansas Department of Education
Four Capitol Mall, Room 403-A
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SENT VIA ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION & USPS

Re: Little Rock School District, Academic Distress Meeting with ADE, January 7,
2015

Dear Mrs. Saviers,

I am writing to you concerning the Little Rock School District's upcoming meeting on January 7, 2015, scheduled with the Academic Distress Committee which you are chairman. As a board member I feel compelled to individually communicate some of my concerns to you. Please feel free to share this letter with those that you deem appropriate.

I was elected to the LRSD School Board in September 2011. I took my oath of office and understand my role as a school board member to act in the best interests of students, parents, staff and other community residents. I also understand that the school board sets the direction of the district, ensures that it is properly administered, establishes policy and represents the education interests of the community. The superintendent is the district's chief executive officer (CEO) who carries out policy and day-to-day administration of the schools. I further understand that no individual board member has any power or authority and must never attempt to act as an administrator of the school system. We, as board members, can act only as a group. No single board member has the right to make any decision for the rest of the board. The only time board members may transact any business is when we meet in a legally convened session. *See* § A.C.A. 6-13-620 (2012). *See also* www.lrsd.org/drupal/?q=content/role-lrsd-board.

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With that said, this letter represents my own individual opinion based on my observations and experiences from attendance and participation in public school board meetings and work sessions held by the LRSD. My observations also come from email communications sent to the LRSD Superintendent, Dr. Dexter Suggs, from LRSD school board members whereby the entire school board was copied on the email communication. I would consider these emails public meetings as they involved the entire board and the superintendent. Finally, I respect my fellow board members and recognize that we have differing opinions on many issues that are presented to the Board.

Turning to the issue before the Arkansas Department of Education, I have apprehension about the ability of the LRSD to make progress for students not only for the six schools on academic distress¹ but for the entire district because of the dysfunctional relationship between the LRSD School Board and the superintendent. As history tells, over the past twenty-five years, the LRSD has had different superintendents every eighteen to twenty-four months. Our history shows that the LRSD school board cannot support and retain superintendents.

This pattern is unfortunately clear and consistent. Accordingly, I am concerned that we are repeating the same cycle again. Since 2006, this district has been on alert that the state was keeping a careful eye on it because of profound academic deficiencies. We, as board members, all knew of the academic deficiencies when we were elected. However, as a whole, we have not been able to support Dr. Suggs and his team to make the strategic changes needed to improve these failing schools. Dr. Suggs was hired as the LRSD superintendent in the Spring of 2013 to be the change agent that the LRSD needed and wanted. He is a visionary leader with long term plans for the LRSD academically and fiscally. He has innovative, creative, and progressive ideas. Yet, his plans involving academics, athletics, technology, Special Education, English Language Learners, Gifted & Talented and more are suppressed or even eliminated because of our board. Dr. Suggs maintains his focus on students, repeating that in almost every meeting and communication. Dr. Suggs has the maturity and confidence to avoid wading through the nonsensical commentary and micromanagement of the current board; however, he cannot put any of his plans into place or explore them further with the board's lack of support, micromanagement, and criticism.

Below, I have listed six specific examples illustrating the current LRSD school board's inability to work with the superintendent and make progress for students.

First, board member(s) are consistently rude, inconsiderate, patronizing, and insulting to the superintendent. This has included yelling and interrupting Dr. Suggs, his staff, and other board members as individuals attempt to make presentations, answer questions, or make a comment. This tone is also expressed in email dialogue.

¹ Baseline Elementary School, Cloverdale Middle School, Henderson Middle School, Hall High School, J.A. Fair High School and McClellan High School

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Second, board member(s) consistently claim to “not know what is going on” or “never received reports and communications.” This is a regular issue that we spend a lot of time on in our meetings, questioning whether communications have been sent or received. After much discussion board member(s) acknowledge that the report was included in a Friday update² but they had not had an opportunity to review or overlooked the document. During these meetings, the superintendent often resends the communications to board members via email. I believe that these statements are made to delay voting on issues and to cast a shadow upon Dr. Suggs’ and his cabinets’ credibility. As a board member, I will readily admit that I do not read every report given to me by the LRSD but I do read and analyze as much information as I can and have never seen anything that would cause me concern about Dr. Suggs’ or his cabinets’ honesty.

Third, board members attempt to micromanage the day-to-day operations of the LRSD. This includes board member(s) attempting to have a previously eliminated department within the LRSD, formerly known as Planning, Research & Evaluation, resurrected. Board member(s) have also recommended better hiring practices to the superintendent, specifically dealing with English as a Second Language needs at a school in Southwest Little Rock. Moreover, board member(s) have recently questioned Dr. Suggs’ support of a building principal’s decision to not allow a non-family visitor into a school to meet with a minor student in a school. Per Arkansas law and the superintendent’s contract, Dr. Suggs carries out the day-to-day operation of the schools, including reorganizing departments and personnel issues, under the supervision of and approval of the board. *See* § A.C.A. 6-13-620 (2012); *see also* “Employment Contract Between Board of Education of Little Rock School District and Dr. Dexter Suggs” (Dated September 25, 2014).

Fourth, the board, fails to support Dr. Suggs on the majority of issues. Recent examples of this continued pattern of lack of support on issues both big and small are related to the twenty-five dollar deposit required by parents on the 1:1 technology integration, scheduling the date and time of the initial millage steering committee meeting, employee terminations, principal assignments, and forming an exploratory committee on the possibility of reconfiguring Hall High School.

Fifth, board member(s) monitor cell phones and social media during board meetings. Although there is not a board policy prohibiting such use during our meetings, these communications cause me concern that some of their opinions and motions made during the meetings come from outside sources, which I consider problematic.

Sixth, I would like for you to be aware that there is a tone of arrogance, power and control by board member(s) in private executive session meetings. There is only a shred

² In addition to other communications, the LRSD school board receives a weekly update from Dr. Suggs and his cabinet on Friday afternoons. These reports include regular weekly updates including updates from maintenance/operations and academic accountability. Other reports requested by board member(s) are often included in these reports as well.

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of an indication that the seven board members are willing to work together with the superintendent for the best interest of the students. The language and attitude used when speaking with others, including the superintendent, is, at a minimum, unprofessional, and I would consider such behavior hostile, degrading and unconscionable.

I am not a career board member and am committed to serving on the LRSD school board through the end of my term although I believe that my service may be an act of futility. I ran for school board to make progress for students. I would never expect a board to unanimously agree on every issue or support a superintendent on every issue. However, I would expect for us to support a superintendent to the point where we are best serving the students of the LRSD and ensuring they receive the education they are guaranteed. That is not happening.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge our board president, Mr. Greg Adams, for his energetic, honest and tireless leadership in his effort to have our board work together as a team for the students of Little Rock. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the LRSD is headed down an even darker path than in recent years. I believe that the current board has and will continue to set a new high level of dysfunction. If proved correct, the LRSD will lose Dr. Suggs, an aspiring, honest and driven leader that our community, most importantly, our students, cannot afford to let leave the LRSD. It is evident that we are at a major turning point for the LRSD and significant changes must occur in order to ensure the educational opportunities for the students of the LRSD.

Thank you for your consideration. I appreciate your commitment and service to guaranteeing the proper education of all children in the State of Arkansas.

Sincerely,

Leslie Fiskien
Little Rock School District
School Board Member, Zone 3

cc: Mr. Greg Adams, LRSD School Board, President
Ms. Joy Springer, LRSD School Board, Vice President
Dr. Jim Ross, LRSD School Board, Secretary
Ms. Dianne Curry, LRSD School Board, Member
Mr. C.E. McAdoo, LRSD School Board, Member
Ms. Tara Shephard, LRSD School Board, Member
Dr. Dexter Suggs, LRSD, Superintendent
Mr. Marvin Burton, LRSD, Deputy Superintendent
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