

To: Mr. Sam Ledbetter, Chair, ADE Board
Mrs. Vickie Saviers, Chair of Academic Distress Committee
Members of the Board – Arkansas Department of Education

From: Joy Springer, Board Member
Little Rock School District

Date: January 6, 2015

My name is Joy Springer. On September 16, 2014, a majority of the electorate of Zone 1 in the Little Rock School District who came to the polls elected me to serve as their representative on the Little Rock School Board of Directors. My platform was to require improved administrative accountability in addressing the academic achievement of students in our low performing schools.

I received notice earlier this week that one of my board members characterized the majority board members of the Little Rock School District as being “dysfunctional”. I further note that at the same time an editorial was being published in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette by a former board member and state senator echoing the same sentiments. They claim that the Board is so dysfunctional that the school administration is unable to do its job of educating the children of the district.

I am compelled to respond to these unfounded allegations, which if accepted, could have the effect of nullifying the will of the people to elect representatives to govern the school district responsible for the education of their children.

Allegation of dysfunctionality of board members

I must categorically deny that I am dysfunctional nor am I guilty of the allegations being alleged by our board member . The majority of the board members (five) have been on the board for less than two years. I believe that the board relations are good. It appears that our discussions have been misinterpreted. Eventually, we have agreed to disagree.

I am performing normally, don't have any parts that are malfunctioning, nor have I acted outside any acceptable norms. I am a proud resident of Zone 1 of the Little Rock School District. I ran unabashedly on a reform platform. After being a monitor for the Joshua Intervenors for over 20 years, I saw firsthand that African American and poor students, who were mostly Latino, were not receiving the same educational opportunities as the white and more affluent students in the Pulaski County school districts including Little Rock, Pulaski County and North Little Rock. As I monitored the Little Rock School District, I became aware that the majority of students who lived in the zones east of Shackelford Road and south of I-

630 were not meeting state standards as reflected by standardized tests mandated by the State of Arkansas. I also learned that there were basically no African American teachers in the schools that were considered achieving. Their teacher turnover rate was also low. On the other hand, in the other schools, the reverse was true. As a member of the LRSD Board, I am committed to all students achieving equally and at high levels.

I believe that the majority of the Board would say that the Board has had productive, healthy dialogue. We each have had the opportunity to raise questions about relevant issues and we seek to hold the superintendent accountable for following our policies and achieving the goals and objectives, the most important being student achievement. I think you would agree that seeking information is critical to informed decision making. My remarks, however, have always been respectful. But I insist upon honest, truthful information from the administration to our inquiries. In seeking election to the LRSD Board, I committed to my patrons that I would insist upon improved administrative accountability in order to improve student achievement.

If members of this committee will recall at our last meeting before you, senior LRSD administrators admitted that “[it] did not support the staff in the schools”, “was not focused” and “did not pay attention to those persons responsible for educating our students.” It was further acknowledged that the administration began plans for enhanced student achievement but “did not stick” to them.

After hearing those admissions, I became convinced that it was my duty and responsibility as a representative of Zone 1 to ensure that the administrators stayed focused, that they become motivated to educate all students and that they “stick” to a plan in order to later evaluate its effectiveness in improving student achievement. As it is the Board’s duty, this was to be done by holding the superintendent accountable.

Allegation that board member(s) consistently claim to “not know what is going on” or “never receive reports and communications.”

There is also an allegation before you that board members claim not to be fully informed for tactical reasons. This allegation is a distortion of the truth. It is not unreasonable for Board members to seek additional information especially where additional clarification is needed regarding topics under discussion. To characterize Board member requests for documents as a ploy for delay is unfounded.

Allegation that board member(s) attempt to micromanage the day –to-day operations of the LRSD.

With respect to the allegation that Board members micromanage the day to day operations of the district, I deny that allegation as well in the context presented by our complaining board member. According to board policy and state law, the superintendent must secure board approval regarding the reorganization of departments and hiring of personnel.

The allegation by my fellow board member fails to state that the superintendent did not receive board approval regarding the reorganization of the PRE department. She also failed to state that the Board was being asked by me to approve an evaluation process to help determine the effectiveness of programs designed to improve student achievement.

I do not recall any hiring practice recommended by the board other than suggesting the need for the administration to make hiring recommendations for staff to work with ESL students, in need of assistance, who are in great numbers at two of the academic distressed schools.

Our schools are public places. No parent should be denied the right to have representation regarding services under Public Law 94-142 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1964.

Allegation that the Board fails to support Dr. Suggs on the majority of issues.

The Board has supported the superintendent on the majority of the issues presented to it by him. I have only been on the board since October, 2014. During this time, there have been over 20 action items that the board has supported the superintendent's recommendation including 1:1 technology, employee terminations, and forming an exploratory committee regarding the reconfiguration of Hall High School.

The Board opposed charging a fee for the computers which was determined to be a violation of the law. It is my understanding that public schools cannot condition school attendance and participation upon the means of its students.

In addition, Board members raised questions regarding whether the superintendent had followed board policy prior to board approval of the recommended new principal assignments. We have a contract with the teachers that require the posting of positions. The Board requested legal advice.

I believe that the Board takes very serious the constitution of a millage steering committee to make recommendations to the Board regarding facilities. Prior to scheduling a meeting date and time for this committee, Board members requested

additional time to appoint members and for the maintenance and operations department of the district to provide a list of projects needing immediate attention. We want to have construction done on the basis of need, equality and equity.

Allegation that Board member(s) monitor cell phones and social media during board meetings.

The allegation regarding board members being influenced through the monitoring of social media and cell phones during board meetings is also denied by me. It is not founded. It is the board practice that all of its members use computers during our meetings. I am unaware of what other board members do regarding the use of their cell phones. It is my duty to concentrate on the agenda during meetings. Our meetings are televised and therefore it is easily discernable whether we are paying attention.

General Comments

My review of the data indicates that the LRSD has had 9 superintendents between the period of 1985 to 2004. During these years, the majority board was Caucasian. During the 2006-2007 school year, the Board became majority African American. There have been four superintendents including Dr. Suggs.

Review of educational periodicals further indicates that the average tenure of a superintendent in urban districts is approximately 3 years.

The LREA has communicated to me that over 25 teachers voluntarily resigned because of poor job performance during that time.

Between 2000 and the present, the State has taken over six school districts. There are currently 26 schools in 15 districts on academic distress. I was unable to locate any evidence of any district having any material improvement of minority student achievement after State takeover. Those districts were either consolidated with another district and/or currently remain under State control.

Our board member indicates that she respects us and our opinions. I believe that respect should have been demonstrated by prior discussion with each of the board members before she suggested takeover of the district by State.

Finally, while I was compelled to respond to my fellow board member because these allegations were brought to your attention. I hasten to point out that, in my opinion, the issues raised by my colleague do not relate to whether we have embraced the recommendations of the ADE.