

1 To: State Board of Education

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3 From: Committee on Pulaski County School District Boundaries (Jay Barth, chair;  
4 Kim Davis, Sam Ledbetter, and Dianne Zook)

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7 At its special meeting on 28 January 2015, the State Board of Education (SBE)  
8 established a committee “charged with studying the appropriate school district lines  
9 within Pulaski County, taking into account communities of interest, student  
10 demographics, facilities, and property tax base with a report due back to the State  
11 Board no later than the June 2015 regularly scheduled meeting.” This represents  
12 that report.

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14 Since January, the committee held a series of five meetings during which it  
15 examined demographic and tax data across the county, heard from the  
16 superintendents of the four school districts presently operating in the county, and  
17 heard public comments from numerous individuals and entities with ties to the  
18 communities of interest in the county. *(See attached committee meeting minutes.)* As  
19 a result of this work, the committee has come to understand the complexity of issues  
20 surrounding the school district lines within Pulaski County.

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22 At the outset, it should be recognized that the State Board of Education’s powers  
23 related to any alteration of the Pulaski County Special School District (PCSSD)  
24 boundaries are sharply limited at present by a series of federal court actions dating  
25 back to the 1989 federal court settlement agreement. As reiterated by rulings by  
26 the federal court in 2003 and 2014, the State Board of Education may not alter the  
27 district lines of the PCSSD until that district is declared unitary by the federal court.  
28 Indeed, under the 2014 settlement agreement/consent judgment, “[t]he State will  
29 oppose the creation of any other school districts from PCSSD’s territory is declared  
30 fully unitary and is released from court supervision.” That said, as the PCSSD  
31 remains in state control because of fiscal distress, the statutory requirements that  
32 “the state board shall consolidate, annex, or reconstitute any school district that fails  
33 to remove itself from the classification of a school district in fiscal distress within  
34 five (5) consecutive school years of classification of fiscal distress status” (Ark. Code  
35 Ann. § 6-20-1908) may come into conflict with these previous agreements if the  
36 PCSSD remains in fiscal distress at the end of a five year period. This report  
37 recognizes that federal court orders take precedence over state laws.

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39 The committee strongly believes that the healthiest school districts are those where  
40 communities of interest (identified by municipal boundaries, among other factors)  
41 are in synchronicity with school district boundaries. That said, it is crucial that any  
42 district have the necessary tax base to appropriately serve its student population.  
43 Finally, district lines cannot be used to create racially identifiable school districts.  
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45 Driven by these principles and based on our study, at the point at which the PCSSD  
46 is declared unitary, we believe that the process through which these alterations to  
47 districts lines in Pulaski County should be undertaken by the SBE:  
48

- 49 A) South of the Arkansas River: The division of the city of Little Rock into two  
50 different school districts has undermined the health of the LRSD across  
51 recent years. Therefore, the LRSD and the city of Little Rock’s boundaries  
52 should be brought together. However, once the western portion of the city of  
53 Little Rock were brought into the LRSD, a limited tax base would exist in the  
54 remainder of the PCSSD area south of the Arkansas River. Therefore, it is  
55 our sense that a single school district south of the River (perhaps named  
56 Little Rock-South Pulaski School District) be created to create cohesion and  
57 to enhance efficiency in educational offerings.  
58
- 59 B) Saline County Portions of PCSSD: Most of the students living in the  
60 municipality of Shannon Hills, in Saline County, attend the Bryant School  
61 District, but a handful of students in Shannon Hills live within the PCSSD and  
62 attend PCSSD schools. The committee was convinced that in the interest of  
63 maintaining community cohesion in Shannon Hills it makes sense that that  
64 portion of Saline County presently a part of PCSSD be shifted to the Bryant  
65 School District. A second small portion of Saline County to the southwest  
66 (*See attached map.*) is also in PCSSD and, for consistency’s sake, we believe  
67 that area should also be shifted to the adjoining Bryant School District.  
68
- 69 C) North of the Arkansas River: In addition to Jacksonville, three other  
70 identifiable communities exist north of the Arkansas River in the county  
71 (North Little Rock, Sherwood, and Maumelle). Large chunks of the  
72 municipality of North Little Rock are outside of the NLRSD and the value of  
73 creating coterminous lines between the city and NLRSD is compelling. In  
74 addition, with the Jacksonville-North Pulaski District as a precedent, the  
75 cities of Sherwood and Maumelle have established a case for separate school  
76 districts including those communities and surrounding areas. When unitary  
77 status is achieved for PCSSD, reconfiguration of the boundaries could begin  
78 as outlined in Ark. Code Ann. § 6-13-1414. Additionally, provided that a  
79 potential new district meets the eligibility criteria outlined in Ark. Code Ann.  
80 § 6-13-1501 et. seq., a detachment process could begin with negotiations  
81 among North Little Rock, Maumelle, and Sherwood to ascertain the most  
82 appropriate division of the portions of PCSSD north of the Arkansas River.  
83 In this work, of course, showing full respect for Ark. Code Ann. § 6-13-  
84 1414(f) and 6-13-1504 is vital so that racially identifiable district(s) are not  
85 created through this process. As the case of Jacksonville-North Pulaski has  
86 shown the detachment process is complicated both in design and in  
87 implementation, but there is strong value in the development of four  
88 identifiable districts with cities as hubs north of the River.  
89

90 D) Scott Community: The Scott community, which is not a municipality,  
91 straddles the Pulaski and Lonoke County lines. Students in the community  
92 are split into separate school districts. Thus, while similar to the Shannon  
93 Hills case, it is different because it is not fully within one county. Based on  
94 the public comments we received, we believe that a new border be created  
95 with areas south of Upper Steel Bend Road and south of Lower Steel Bend  
96 Road moved to the England School District in Lonoke County to maintain that  
97 community of interest while also reducing travel time for students. (*See*  
98 *attached map.*)  
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100 Finally, the recently created Jacksonville-North Pulaski School District should be  
101 allowed to operate in accordance with the district lines created as a result of the  
102 detachment approved by the SBE in 2014.  
103

104 In addition, particularly if more districts are created in the county, it is clear to the  
105 committee that education in Pulaski County could be made more efficient through  
106 the recreation of an Education Service Cooperative to provide certain services  
107 across the districts of the county and through other inter-district agreements on the  
108 provision of services (e.g. transportation).  
109

110 The committee asks that the SBE accept this report and endorse this approach to  
111 school district lines within Pulaski County at the point if and when the SBE's powers  
112 over district lines in Pulaski County are restored.