

# News Release

For immediate release:

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## **Board Members Thurman, Smith to Unifi-Ed: We Don't Believe What You Believe**

### *Board Members Reject "Integration" Called for In APEX Platform*

Two members of the Hamilton County School Board said today they reject the idea that county schools need to "racially and economically integrate," the premise of a recently released policy platform from Unifi-Ed, a 4-year old organization created to support public education.

"People believe Unifi-Ed's purpose is to work in concert with many others to better public education in Hamilton County," said Joe Smith, school board member from District 3. "That changed last fall when they announced the APEX project and formed a political action committee. I didn't realize what it meant then, but I do today."

"I simply do not believe what Unifi-Ed believes," said Rhonda Thurman, school board member from District 1. "I don't think there are many people in Hamilton County who will agree with what they are proposing."

Unifi-Ed (UE) released its 55-page APEX Project platform to the School Board at its April 19 meeting. The platform is the result of a six-month process UE says included all viewpoints from Hamilton County. The platform says that the school system "must create a plan, together with the community, to racially and socioeconomically desegregate our schools." The strategies to "integrate" schools would include a "robust transportation policy."

"UE calls for using busing to promote integration," said Thurman. "Unifi-Ed may think that busing is a new and innovative idea but, the truth is that busing was tried in the '60's, '70's and '80's. It did not work then and it will not work now, I don't care what the research says."

The 501c3 non-profit Unifi-Ed created a political action committee late last year, and the UE PAC actively worked for the slate of candidates it endorsed in the recent May 1 Democrat and Republican primaries. UE said those endorsements will stay in place for the county elected offices while the UE PAC is scheduling interviews with school board members this month regarding UE's endorsements for August. UE is currently co-hosting a series of debates with Chattanooga 2.0 for the five contested school board elections, scheduled for the county August general election. Two debates have been held, two are scheduled and one remains to be scheduled.

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In the District 8 debate between incumbent David Testerman and Tucker McClendon, moderator Allison Lebovitz, a UE board member, ask for a specific plan from both candidates to “racially and socioeconomically integrate our public schools.” Smith, who will debate his opponent on May 21 at Hixson High School, said the candidates participating in the debates had been given a set of questions to answer from UE, and the first two dealt with committing to “a plan to end socioeconomic and racial segregation.” Smith also said debate participants have received the first five questions that will be ask, and the second question ask what specific plans they would have and implement to “fully integrate our public schools to ensure equity for all of our young people?”

“I read every word of the report after we received it in April, and I have talked with the education leaders in my district about this policy,” said Smith, who is on the ballot in August. “I can’t support what it says. I am not sure how Unifi-Ed can say this represents Hamilton County because I know it doesn’t represent what the people of District 3 believe.

“Hamilton County is a conservative place, and UE has shown itself to be way far to the left on what they believe,” said Smith.

Both Thurman and Smith believe the report contradicts itself by calling for support for the community school concept being strongly embraced by the Board and Dr. Johnson while at the same time calling for a 2018 version of school integration. Both said they support the work Dr. Johnson is directing regarding community schools and the 2018-19 budget includes support for community schools.

“You can’t have it both ways,” said Thurman.

The UE report calls for using zoning, “controlled” school choice models, increased magnet school access and improved transfer policies as ways to integrate schools. Both Thurman and Smith endorse open enrollment, but both realize the significant increase in transportation cost is prohibitive. Hamilton County schools instituted a magnet plan to increase diversity in the early 2000s, and the Future Ready Institutes being implemented by the school system create 17 new, 400-student magnet schools in four years.

“UE hasn’t considered the cost of doing anything,” said Thurman. “This is my county, I don’t need liberals from out of town coming here telling me what’s best for people in Hamilton County and ordering me to tell the County Commission to take more money from taxpayers.”

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