

November 28, 2016

Commissioner Johnny Key  
Arkansas Department of Education  
Four Capitol Mall, Room 304-A  
Little Rock, AR 72201

Dear Mr. Key,

We, the undersigned, are clergy representing a variety of faith traditions present in Little Rock. We serve generous people of faith who care about the common good of all who call our community home, especially the children.

As religious leaders, we measure our concern by the welfare of the most vulnerable in our midst. Therefore, we pledge our unwavering support for all the children who are educated in the Little Rock School District. We have come together to unite our voices in support of the LRSD; because we know that, without a strong public school system that benefits all children, the number of those who are vulnerable in our community will increase.

This past summer, we visited several of the LRSD schools that have been deemed “distressed.” We’ve counseled with administrators who meet significant challenges head on. We’ve heard teachers who are molding the next generation with pedagogical expertise and genuine concern for their students. We’ve listened to both the joys and the challenges of those who work in the district, and we have heard stories of redemption and hope.

We found that much good is happening in our schools. We were inspired by the girls’ empowerment clubs at Henderson Middle School that took 20 students to Washington DC last year. The entire trip was funded through student-led fundraisers and the hard work of teachers to raise private sponsorships. This year, they are planning to take 36 girls to New York. We were excited about the community garden project started at Cloverdale Middle School in partnership with some senior adults in the neighborhood. McClellan High School is seeing academic improvement, with rising ACT scores and an 18% growth in geometry scores in 2015-16. In short, we left those schools feeling inspiration, not desperation.

From all the schools we visited, we also heard of a dire need for consistent one-on-one mentors, especially men. They need funds to sponsor the extra-curricular activities that build the “soft skills” that research has found to be so critical to an education that prepares the next generation for success. They need good PR; people sharing the great things that are happening in their schools. We were reminded that improving our schools requires investment from every facet of our community: government, business, non-profit, the arts, and faith communities. Now is an opportune time for all in the community, not just parents and teachers, to invest in our school. We are urging the faith communities we serve and the entire community of Little Rock to advocate on behalf of all the children who will spend their most formative years in the care of the LRSD and those who serve them with excellence.

As hopeful as we are about children and the education they are receiving from the schools, we are just as concerned about the leadership of the district as a whole. The State Board of Education's unjust and unilateral decision, rendered with insufficient notice or warning, to remove the democratically elected LRSD Board has structurally divided the district from the community at a time when community engagement is essential. Therefore, we call on you to immediately return the LRSD to control by the locally elected board that was deposed on January 28, 2015.

We are deeply concerned about continuing and increasing segregation in LRSD. Our visits to the schools labeled "distressed" reminded us of a sad fact we already knew: While some LRSD schools are integrated, the schools labeled "distressed" and others like them are not. Virtually all the students in those schools are Black and Latino and the schools bear the burden of issues that accompany the concentrated poverty in their student body. We want to know how you plan to integrate LRSD – for real, this time. We want to know your plan to ensure excellent education for every child of LRSD, particularly those who will remain in traditional public schools after the charter expansion skims off even more students who come from families with the resources to access "school choice." We join the rest of the community in holding you accountable to transparent leadership that benefits the children of the LRSD.

Next year, we will celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic integration of Little Rock Central High. Once again, the eyes of the nation will be on our city. Do we want the view of Little Rock to be one of the state's take over of our schools for what many see as racial motivations? Do we want the world to see that a diverse, democratically elected board has been supplanted by one white man? Do we want to be an object of national scorn once again? The last year has taught us that we are at a moment rivaled only by the late 1950's, to ensure that excellent public education may be available for all of our children. Like that difficult struggle six decades ago, we are calling on Little Rock to unify through volunteerism and advocacy. Our city must reignite the spirit of the Women's Emergency Committee whose hard working members set the needs of ALL of the children in Little Rock far above any political and financial agenda.

Sincerely,  
Concerned Clergy for the LRSD

Rev. Kate Alexander  
Christ Episcopal Church

Rev. Preston Clegg  
Second Baptist Church

Rev. Michael Blanchard  
Oak Forest United Methodist Church

Rev. Dr. Denise Donnell, MDiv  
Human Rights Campaign Arkansas

Rev. Billy Burris  
St. Peter Missionary Baptist Church

Rev. Barbara Douglas  
St. Luke United Methodist Church

Rev. Jay Clark  
Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church

Rev. Katye Dunn  
Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church

Rev. David C. Freeman  
First United Methodist Church

Rev. Wendell Griffen  
New Millennium Church

Rev. Tony Griffin  
Highland Valley United Methodist Church

Rev. Steve Hancock  
Second Presbyterian Church

Rev. Donna Hankins-Hull  
First United Methodist Church

The Rev. Joyce Hardy  
Christ Episcopal Church

Rev. Ray Higgins  
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of  
Arkansas

Rev. Marion A. Humphrey  
Allison Memorial Presbyterian Church

Rev. Randy Hyde  
Pulaski Heights Baptist Church

Rabbi Eugene H. Levy  
Retired

Rev. C.E. McAdoo  
Saint Andrew United Methodist Church

Rev. Marie Mainard O'Connell  
Second Presbyterian Church

Rev. Britt Skarda  
Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church

The Rev. Mary Vano  
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church

Rev. Lindy Vogado  
Second Presbyterian Church

Rev. Anika T. Whitfield  
The Church Universal

The Rev. Ed Wills, Jr  
St. Michael's Episcopal Church

\*Church and organizational names listed only for identification purposes.