

HINDS COUNTY DEMOCRATIC DELEGATION

Mississippi Legislature
Post Office Box 1018
Jackson, MS 39215
601.707.5705



Senator David Blount
Senator Hillman Frazier
Senator John Horhn
Senator Sollie Norwood
Representative Earle Banks
Representative Christopher Bell
Representative Credell Calhoun

Representative Alyce Clarke
Representative Deborah Dixon
Representative Debra Gibbs
Representative Jarvis Dortch
Representative Gregory Holloway
Representative Kathy Sykes
Representative Adrienne Wooten

September 11, 2017

Dr. Carey Wright
State Superintendent
Mississippi Department of Education
359 North West Street
Jackson, MS 39201

Commission on School Accreditation
359 North West Street
Jackson, MS 39201

State Board Members
Mississippi Department of Education
359 North West Street
Jackson, MS 39201

Re: Jackson Public School District

Dear Dr. Wright, Members of the Commission on School Accreditation, and Members of the Mississippi Board of Education:

It has come to our attention that the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) Office of Accreditation completed its On-site Investigative Audit of the Jackson Public School District (JPS) on July 31, 2017, and presented the 680-page document to JPS on August 31, 2017. We understand that on September 13, 2017, the Office of Accreditation will present evidence to the Commission on School Accreditation that JPS has an extreme emergency that jeopardizes the safety, security, educational interest of students, or constitutes serious violations of accreditation standards. If the Commission determines that an extreme emergency exists within JPS, a state takeover will likely occur. We, the undersigned Hinds County Legislators, have grave reservations about this entire process and the extreme negative impact a state takeover will have on the City of Jackson, surrounding areas, and the State of Mississippi.

Dr. Carey Wright
Commission on School Accreditation
State Board Members
September 11, 2017
Page 2

First, we understand it is unprecedented for one of your school districts to simultaneously undergo a legislative audit of 22 schools, implement a corrective action plan for those schools, and participate in a full investigative audit of 58 schools; yet MDE subjected JPS to this unprecedented action. It seems unreasonable, unduly burdensome, and almost impossible to achieve for both MDE and JPS staff. It is also unreasonable for MDE to expect that JPS can completely digest and then address a 680-page report in less than 14 days and present evidence to the Commission in 40 minutes.

Secondly, while we are certain MDE wants to ensure a bright future for every child, it must ensure that audit processes are fair, objective, and not arbitrary. It is our belief that standard operating procedures necessitate sharing the qualifications of auditors and their contact information with the audited entity. If that did not occur, MDE may have dealt unfairly and arbitrarily with JPS. For instance, JPS has academically diverse programs such as performing arts, Montessori and the International Baccalaureate. Did the auditors of those programs have experience or knowledge in auditing the curriculum of those special programs? If not, that was unfair to JPS. Furthermore, we are gravely concerned that 140 pages of the audit findings consist of negative newspaper articles, blogs, and other media articles about JPS. In fact, the audit findings include an article about a shooting near a bus stop dated August 25, 2017, **after the audit ended on July 31, 2017**. However, according to Dr. Paula Vanderford's letter to JPS dated August 31, 2017, MDE based its findings on "interviews conducted with JPSD staff, observations and completed evaluation forms, analysis of official documentation on file in the JPSD, and analysis of official reports submitted to the MDE." Clearly, blogs, newspaper and other media articles are not objective, evaluative, official documentation, or based on interviews with JPS staff. Instead, such articles are hearsay and amount to nothing more than an attempt to persuade the Commission against JPS unjustly and unfairly. It is our hope that the Commission members disregard the articles and base their decision on the evidence before them.

Thirdly, despite JPS' challenges, we believe it made great strides in several areas. This school year, we have not seen the disruptive and negative climate that the audit findings portray. In fact, one legislator recently remarked that Callaway High School students were very quiet and orderly during a visit this year. It is worth noting that Davis Magnet Elementary School was the number one elementary school in the State last year. Further, the MDE Board of Education recognized a Baker Elementary science teacher as exemplary. JPS made these achievements despite a statewide teacher shortage. To correct its transportation problems, JPS recently purchased 44 new buses with GPS technology, equipped more buses with cameras and filled driver vacancies by increasing bus driver salaries to attract drivers. We believe these steps caused more buses to arrive to school on time this school year. However, the audit findings, completed before the start of this school year, fail to reflect the timely arrival times. We also understand JPS will make some improvements to its aging school buildings. Additionally, according to media accounts, JPS, with over 26,000 students and 4,000 employees, recently restructured to create areas that are more manageable. MDE should allow sufficient time for that restructure to take hold. If indeed an extreme emergency existed in JPS during the course of the audits, why is the recommendation for takeover just occurring at this late juncture?

Dr. Carey Wright
Commission on School Accreditation
State Board Members
September 11, 2017
Page 3

Fourth, it is important to us, as Hinds County Legislators, that JPS, which is the State's only urban district, remains under local control. Taxpayers, parents, and citizens of Jackson deserve the opportunity to control and have a voice in their school district. Conservators and takeovers generally have not made sustained improvements to the quality of the school districts.

Fifth, we are concerned that MDE's takeover of JPS will have a detrimental economic impact on the Capital City, surrounding cities and schools, and the entire State. Undoubtedly, it will be more difficult to attract industry if the State takes over the largest school district in the Capital City.

In conclusion, it is our belief that the findings may suggest a need for a Corrective Action Plan, but because of recent improvements, emergency action is not warranted. Please know that we are committed to improving JPS, but we are not in favor of a state takeover that will harm the city, the school district, and State. We welcome the opportunity to meet with each of you to discuss this matter and explore other alternatives.

Sincerely,

Adrianne Belton *Christy Bell* *Hebert*
Willie France *J. D. [unclear]* *Barth [unclear]*
[unclear] *[unclear]* *Kathy Sykes*
Alvin Thunders *Bilal* *Sollie Nowick* *Dreg Hallaway, Sr.*
Hinds County Democratic Delegation *[unclear]* *[unclear]*