



# GAIL ETIENNE

## CIVIL RIGHTS PIONEER

January 5, 2026

Dear Members of the Orleans Parish School Board,

My name is Gail Etienne. I am a member of The New Orleans Four, the four 6-year-old girls who, sixty-five years ago, desegregated New Orleans public schools. On November 14, 1960, alongside Leona Tate and Tessie Prevost, we desegregated McDonogh 19 Elementary School on the same morning that Ruby Bridges enrolled at William Frantz Elementary School.

That moment in history was not only life-changing for us as children; it was a defining act of courage by our parents and our community. It reflected a deep commitment to equal access, public accountability, and the fundamental belief that EVERY child deserves a high-quality public school education.

It revealed the courage of parents who refused to accept limits on their children's futures. They believed public school education should belong to all of us. They believed leadership must be accountable to the community it serves.

Today, parents are standing again, in that very same mission of courage for their children. They are standing on the strength of their convictions, just as my parents did, Theodile and Eula Mae Etienne.

These parents are advocating not for privilege, but for access; not for convenience, but for dignity; not for exclusion, but for the kind of public school education they know their children deserve.

The name Leah Chase School carries a legacy all its own.

Leah Chase was not only the Queen of Creole Cuisine, she was a civil rights activist who understood that justice is built in community. Alongside her husband, Edgar "Dooky" L. Chase II, they created a safe and sacred space where courage was nourished and strategy was shaped. At Dooky Chase's Restaurant, when doors were closed elsewhere, their doors were open, and tables were available.

It was there that giants of the Civil Rights Movement, including our parents, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., A.P. Tureaud, Thurgood Marshall, Ernest and Sybil Morial, Johnnie B. and Vergie Castle, Rudy Lombard, Oretha and Doris Jean Castle, Jerome "Big Duck" Smith, Doratha "Dodie" Smith Simmons, Ronnie Moore, and so many others, gathered to organize and plan the dismantling of segregation in this city and help move this nation forward.

To place Leah Chase's name on a public school is not symbolic. It is a commitment. It is an inheritance of responsibility.



# GAIL ETIENNE

## CIVIL RIGHTS PIONEER

To close Leah Chase School **AFTER ONLY ONE YEAR** is not merely a policy or budgetary decision, it is a profound turning away from the very legacy her name represents.

In my humble opinion, it is a dishonor to Leah Chase. It is a dishonor to our parents. And it is a disregard to the legacy of The New Orleans Four, whose courage opened the doors of public school education in New Orleans and throughout the Deep South.

From what I have learned and observed, the Leah Chase School community has worked tirelessly to strengthen academic outcomes while raising private support to survive within a system overwhelmingly dominated by charter schools in Orleans Parish.

Despite immense pressure and limited time, this school has already demonstrated clear and meaningful strengths, and it deserves to remain open. Educators have created a safe and nurturing learning environment, shown a deep commitment to diverse learners, and demonstrated the ability to serve traditional, gifted, and special education students on one campus.

The school is staffed by fully certified, highly qualified educators who are deeply committed to student success.

Recent testimonies from parents speaking passionately about why they chose Leah Chase School, remind me of the unity and resolve of our parents more than six decades ago. Then, as now, families were not asking for convenience. They were advocating with all their might for fairness, dignity, and EQUAL OPPORTUNITY for their children.

Parents today have spoken clearly about their need for a public school capable of providing consistent, meaningful services for children with special needs, services that many have found difficult or unreliable to access in charter school settings.

Their voices make one truth unmistakably clear: Leah Chase School is not redundant. It is necessary. Families are choosing Leah Chase School because it meets needs that too often go unmet elsewhere. For more than twenty years, the people of New Orleans have called for the return of true, direct-run Orleans Parish public schools. Leah Chase School represents that long-awaited choice.

After Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans became the nation's first all-charter school system, with more than 90% of public school students attending charter schools.

Some scholars and leaders across the nation have described this as an experiment, one carried out on the children of this city, disproportionately affecting Black children and children with special needs. Leah Chase School represents a course correction, a response to decades of community demand, and a long-overdue restoration of public accountability.

There are moments in history when neutrality becomes complicity, when delay becomes denial, and when silence becomes a verdict against justice. This is such a moment.

In April 2025, the Department of Justice quietly ended the chapter on federal school desegregation orders, not because equity has been achieved, but because vigilance has waned. This occurred in the same year we commemorated the 65th anniversary of The New Orleans Four desegregating New Orleans public schools. At the same time, civil rights and voting rights hard-won through blood, sacrifice, and moral courage are once again under assault.

# GAIL ETIENNE

## CIVIL RIGHTS PIONEER

In this waking hour, your decision regarding Leah Chase School is not just administrative.

It is conscious historical moment where you have the power to turn the tide of injustice holding yourselves accountable to the liberties enshrined in the United States Constitution.

To close an Orleans Parish direct-run public school serving Black children, children with disabilities, and families seeking stability AFTER ONLY ONE YEAR is to ignore the long arc of struggle that made public education accessible in the first place.

History will not ask whether this decision was efficient.  
It will ask whether it was JUST.

It will ask whether you chose convenience over conscience, budget lines over human lives, and expediency over equity. It will ask whether, when entrusted with a living legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, did you turn away, or did you stand firm with dignity and honor, remembering that the rights you now exercise were won by those who sacrificed their lives to secure rights and privileges from which you may have benefitted from.

Leah Chase School stands as a testament to the unfinished work of justice.

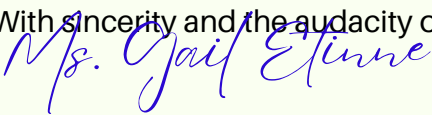
To abandon it now is to retreat from the very promises desegregation was meant to fulfill. To sustain it is to affirm that the sacrifices of those who marched, endured, and resisted were not in vain.

The measure of leadership is not found in what is easy, but in what is JUST. I hope you stand on the right side of history. I hope you choose courage over caution. I hope you choose justice over haste. And I hope you choose to be remembered as guardians of equity, not overseers of its erosion.

The eyes of history are watching, and so are the children. They will remember what you chose to do.

I respectfully, and with the full weight of history and conscience, implore you to grant Leah Chase School the time, support, and stability it needs to grow and succeed as a direct-run public school in Orleans Parish. Let this Board be remembered as one that chose courage, honored legacy, and stood with the children when it mattered most.

With sincerity and the audacity of hope,



Ms. Gail Etienne - Civil Rights Pioneer  
President & CEO  
New Orleans Four LLC.