



RICHLAND ONE

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SCHOOL BOARD

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1616 Richland Street • Columbia, SC 29201 • Office: (803) 231-7556 • Fax: (803) 231-7560

December 18, 2020

Representative Beth Bernstein
Blatt Building, 532C
1105 Pendleton Street
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear Representative Bernstein,

I am reaching out to you to express deep concern regarding an incident that has been brought to my attention. I have been informed that on Tuesday, December 15, 2020, during a webinar held by the Hunt Institute regarding policy formation, you publicly chastised Richland One Superintendent Craig Witherspoon about a previously held meeting. I have received reports from several people present in that meeting, including some of your own colleagues, who felt your unwarranted attack of Dr. Witherspoon was disrespectful and unnecessary, especially as it was done in a meeting with stakeholders from the area.

Your treatment of Dr. Witherspoon during this meeting is unacceptable. If you have a concern about Dr. Witherspoon, it would have been more appropriate to call him aside and discuss it with him professional to professional, or better yet, contact me as Chairman of the School Board or your district representative. Certainly, none of us would publicly chastise a member of your staff, in private or in public, and we would appreciate the same respect as elected officials.

Since this unfortunate situation was done publicly, I expect a public apology for the manner in which you approached Dr. Witherspoon. If there are unresolved concerns you have with Richland One, I and the incoming Chairman are happy to sit down with you to discuss.

In the spirit of cooperation, I am hopeful we can move beyond this situation to ensure we are able to work together in a productive manner for the betterment of our community.

I look forward to your public apology and follow up meeting, if necessary. I can be reached at (803) 231-7556.

Yours in service,


Jamie L. Devine

Chairman, Richland One Board of School Commissioners

Cc: Richland One Board of School Commissioners

Richland County Legislative Delegation



House of Representatives

State of South Carolina

Beth Bernstein

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Committees:

Ethics - Secretary
Judiciary - Subcommittee Chair, Family & Probate Laws
Joint Citizens & Legislative Committee on Children

December 30, 2020

VIA EMAIL TRANSMISSION (jamie.devine@richlandone.org)
AND REGULAR U.S. MAIL

Mr. Jamie L. Devine
Richland One School Board
1616 Richland Street
Columbia, SC 29201

Dear Jamie:

I am in receipt of your letter dated December 18, 2020 and am disturbed by your characterization of my behavior and am surprised that this is your first attempt to discuss this matter with me. This correspondence will accurately reflect what transpired.

By way of background, I share legislative offices with Representatives Kirkman Finlay and Seth Rose. We also share the same legislative aide who for months had been fielding numerous complaints from parents of Richland School District One students about how the district was not properly managing the pandemic. These parents were particularly frustrated with the district's lack of communication and transparency in whether students would be returning to *in person* learning. In addition to the disgruntled phone calls, we also received a petition signed by more than one (1,000+) thousand concerned parents outlining their frustrations with District One. As such, Representative Finlay and I felt it was important to meet with Dr. Witherspoon to apprise him of these ongoing issues. After several unsuccessful requests for a meeting, we finally met with him by zoom conference on the afternoon of October 6, 2020. The conversation was ineffective and proved to be unhelpful. He was dismissive and disengaged, and even accused those parents of "lying" about their concerns. Instead of recognizing the apparent disconnect between the parents and the district, he became very defensive and treated us without any professional courtesy or respect. Ultimately, he never provided any

Mr. Jamie Devine
December 29, 2020
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material response which effectively disregarded those parents' concerns. I should further note that he was rude and condescending to our legislative aide who is also female and assisted in scheduling this meeting.

Since becoming a member of the delegation in 2012, I regularly attend school functions especially when invited, and I attended, at the request of Joanie Lawson, the educational seminar sponsored by the Hunt Institute for members of the Richland County delegation to discuss how the pandemic has impacted early childhood, K-12, and higher education in the Midlands area. I was particularly interested in Dr. Witherspoon's report since he failed to provide Representative Finlay or me with any follow-up in the 15 weeks since our meeting. I was disappointed that he did not address any of the concerns outlined in that meeting, so I asked some questions as was appropriate and warranted in this discussion. Regrettably, he again became quite defensive and disrespectful, and continually interrupted me while I was speaking to the point that I was unable to carry on a dialogue with him. I was astonished to be treated so rudely by him, and I can understand why parents feel their voices are not being heard.

While it is disconcerting that you expended time and energy to criticize me for advocating on behalf of my constituents, I am more concerned that these underlying issues are not being addressed. Obviously, there is a discord between the district and its superintendent with its students and their parents. As a publicly elected member of the school board whose responsibility is to oversee Dr. Witherspoon and to formulate district policies, I hope you will adequately represent your constituents in addressing these issues.

I have always and will continue to provide unwavering support for public education, our teachers, students and local school districts, but I regret that you created this controversy. These baseless attacks on me only further demonstrate why there is much discontent in our community about District One, and I will not be intimidated or silenced by you or Dr. Witherspoon.

By copy of this letter to my colleagues in the delegation, I am notifying them of the same.

Very truly yours,



Beth E. Bernstein

BEB:bb

cc: Richland One School Board
Richland County Legislative Delegation, *via email transmission only*