

August 18, 2023

Oklahoma State Board of Education
Via Electronic Mail

Dear Members of the State Board of Education:

I write today regarding the status of Tulsa Public Schools. I want to start by thanking the Board for making the improvement of outcomes for Tulsa students a priority and focus. As the Mayor of Tulsa, I am mindful of how closely the future vitality of our city is tied to the education of children in our community - and your meeting on Thursday has the potential to impact this significantly.

I have met over the last few weeks with Tulsa Public Schools board leadership and Superintendent Walters, both separately and together. Given the options available to you, I do want to be unequivocally clear regarding a potential state takeover of the locally-elected Tulsa Public Schools Board or the state-mandated replacement of the Tulsa Public Schools Board-appointed superintendent: the City of Tulsa does not seek this, we do not want it, and we do not need it.

Such an extreme action would be an affront to the democratic principles of self government upon which our country was founded. As with many of the authorities allocated to those of us in government by the citizens we serve, just because we have the power to do something doesn't mean we should.

An action of that severity would only be appropriate if the board or superintendent were guilty of criminality or an unwillingness to improve outcomes for students. They are guilty of neither.

The disgraceful embezzlement of public funds by a single former employee has been cited in the District's independent audits. The District has fully complied with ongoing related criminal investigations, and it has modified its internal controls to prevent similar crimes in the future.

This leads me to what we would gladly welcome and appreciate: an ongoing collaboration with the State Department of Education to make Tulsa Public Schools the best school district in the state.

In my discussions with Superintendent Walters he has cited a few areas of specific improvement.

First, he has indicated a desire for Tulsa Public Schools board members to receive the same quality of financial reporting provided by district administrators to board members in other districts around the state. I have discussed this with both Tulsa Public Schools board leadership and Superintendent Gist, and everyone has welcomed guidance on what modifications should be made in this regard. Collaboration with the State Department of Education to implement any currently unutilized best practices regarding financial reporting would be appreciated.

Second, Superintendent Walters has indicated a desire for Tulsa Public Schools to adopt a more aggressive improvement plan for student performance and outcomes. I have discussed this with both Tulsa Public Schools board leadership and Superintendent Gist, and everyone is eager for continuous improvement in this regard. Collaboration with the State Department of Education to identify areas where current strategies and goals could be modified to reasonably achieve better outcomes more quickly would also be appreciated.

We should hold ourselves to high expectations and we should not be satisfied with the status quo. I welcome the Department's challenge to aim higher. I also believe local leadership is committed to working with the Department to continuously improve.

You have my personal commitment to do anything the City of Tulsa or I can offer to assist in this collaboration.

I respectfully ask that you accredit Tulsa Public Schools and let us get on with the work of building a better future for Tulsa children together.

Lastly, I do hope the Board will acknowledge the many successes of Tulsa Public Schools. We are right to identify areas of improvement and to hold any public service to high standards. But we must also recognize the products of Tulsa Public Schools who are doing remarkable work around the world today in every field imaginable, and we should honor the teachers who have dedicated their careers to transforming the lives of children in this community.

Thank you for your consideration, and for your service to our state.

Best Regards,



G.T. Bynum
Mayor
City of Tulsa