



To: State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters

From: Dr. Ebony Johnson

Date: December 11, 2023

I have received a copy of your undated memorandum [“the Memo”] to Tulsa Mayor GT Bynum and Tulsa Public Schools Board President, Stacey Woolley. I note that you have also copied my school board members and made reference to “Tulsa Community.”

I want to offer you my perspective after reviewing your comments.

I am barely three months into my role as interim superintendent of Tulsa Public Schools. I wake up each day, and go to sleep every night, thinking about our district – my district, where I grew up, graduated, where my children have gone to school, and where I have spent the entirety of my professional career. There is no one who, in your words, believes more strongly that “everything that can be done must be done...” for the success of the nearly 34,000 students in our district.

From day one forward, I have instructed my team to work in earnest to develop a cooperative, results-oriented relationship with the Oklahoma State Department of Education. Just as we seek to lead by example for our students in assuming positive intent and approaching difficult issues with curiosity, humility, and a culture of continuous improvement, we have modeled that approach in working with you and your office.

Your memo last week disregarded not only that spirit of shared urgency and cooperation, but took a radical turn by calling my commitment, competence, and level of concern into question. I want to understand this major shift in the state department’s rhetoric.

Plainly, Tulsa Public Schools wants nothing more than to rapidly improve outcomes for students. I am here right now. I am leading the effort. And, I intend to work tirelessly to make that happen.

Further, many of the statements in the Memo are misleading or completely false. My intent in this submission is not to address every problematic assertion you have made, but to highlight the most

dire. I will respond below with your statement and a corrective representation of the facts. Let me address a few of the assertions in your memo and the important facts my fellow Tulsans and I know to be true:

Your statement:

“I have been crystal clear on my position to select a new Superintendent for Tulsa – there should be an aggressive national search, and local leaders as well as other stakeholders must be involved in the selection process because the way that Tulsa succeeds is with the entire state of Oklahoma working together.”

My response:

The decision and process for selecting a superintendent are, by law, committed to the local board of education. Such a process and decision are a fundamental tenet of “local control” by a board of education. Until I read the Memo I had believed that you shared a belief in the fundamental precept of board of education local control. Further, had you asked Board President Woolley, she would have described for you the superintendent selection process the board is already engaged in, the persons consulted and the feedback received. President Woolley has consulted with legal counsel and national talent recruitment experts to ensure a complete and honest understanding of the landscape for a potential leadership search for Tulsa Public Schools. Not a single person has agreed with your contention that a national search would yield the leadership students in Tulsa need and deserve.

I have been directed to hire a new chief financial officer, a new chief operating officer and a new chief of staff, a new deputy superintendent and a new chief of talent officer – just at the top echelons of leadership. Several of my current board members advised me, and I concur, that a search of the sort you recommended would delay getting the right individuals into these crucial positions. Quality candidates for any of these positions will not agree to come to work for TPS without greater certainty about who will lead the district for the foreseeable future. Failure to promptly fill the top administrative positions and take other employment actions for other critical positions will hamstring TPS from reaching the turnaround goals. In short, a lengthy search process as you suggest would directly undermine us meeting the many goals the state board has established.

Of similar importance, my staff, teachers, and the community of Tulsa have expressed the need for stability within our district. We are all in agreement that now is the time to give everything we have on behalf of our students, and that local leaders must participate in the decision on who will lead Tulsa Public Schools. Tulsans have told their board members that they have faith in me as their leader and that they believe I have what it takes to improve student outcomes as well as enact the important additional controls identified as necessary by the pending state audit.

Your statement:

“The next superintendent is going to inherit a district that has had deep foundational issues for years and needs to possess the strength to make hard decisions and sweeping changes. They need to be willing to take urgent action to get schools off the F-list and press for big solutions for schools that have been on the F-list for several years without improvement.”

My response:

I have been very open with you and your board from the beginning of my term as interim superintendent on September 18, 2023, less than three months ago, that TPS has significant deficiencies that have existed for years. I have expressed my willingness “to take urgent action” and have begun doing so. I have been told privately and in open session by your board members how impressed they have been by my actions and approach to date. In fact, Mr. Don Burdick rode in my car when he visited TPS schools and assured me that he supports my leadership. Other state board members have spoken with me after your board meetings and told me what a “great job” I am doing. One even expressed that she is “sorry this is happening to you and your district” and how much she wants TPS to be successful. Her comment was so heartfelt that she began to express visible emotion.

Your statement:

“The next Superintendent needs to come with bold plans to remove schools from the F-list and keep schools off the F-list. The State Board will not be content with future leadership that is not aggressive in ensuring that TPS students don’t have to go to failing schools.”

... “The next superintendent will need to have bold plans to support the students who are struggling the most.”

My response:

My conduct since September 18 has been so transparent that anyone can see that my leadership now is “aggressive” and “bold” and will continue to be in the future. Your Memo implies otherwise about me and the locally-elected TPS Board. There is no risk I won’t take, no urgent matter I will set aside in service to our students, families and their educators. During my short tenure of sixty days, we have done the following, and so much more: increased laser-like academic focus monitored through accountability measures universal intervention that has been affirmed by your department (including Amira Learning and other targeted programs); redoubled intentional internal controls around finances; and begun leadership shifts along with an analysis of what’s best for our students and families to meeting academic needs.

I will also note that factually, due to the bell-curve nature of the A-F grading system, there will always be F schools throughout the state as long as that system is in place. Simply stated: in its current incarnation there will always be “F” schools. ***It is impossible to completely do away with the “F” designation for schools in Oklahoma unless your department or the state legislature changes the system.***

Your statement:

“The State Board of Education will not sit around idly while continuing to let TPS continue down the trajectory they were on under the previous leadership. ***Stop playing around the edges with programs that do not work and schools that continue to fail.*** [emphasis yours] There needs to be drastic change to turn the district around, and the next Superintendent needs to be aggressive in pursuing those changes.

My response:

Your demand for us to “[s]top playing around the edges” is demeaning to the work you’ve ordered us to do and more importantly, highly inaccurate. No one on your team has ever stated or suggested that I and my staff are not working hard to turnaround the serious deficiencies in this district. In fact, it appears to me that there may be a significant schism between you and your staff because the

feedback that I have received from them is that we are doing all that can be done at this point, with lots of hard work ahead. As your staff knows and leading research affirms, a turnaround of TPS is at a minimum three-to-five-year endeavor, no matter who is TPS superintendent. This undisputed fact about the time necessary for significant and sustainable change further underscores one of the most significant challenges to a national talent search.

Your statement:

“If the next superintendent does not make the bold changes needed to improve the district, the State Board will continue to do everything in its power to ensure the success of the district. All eyes are on Tulsa and every option at the disposal of the Board and my office will be used if the culture of failure continues to be promoted in Tulsa. Everything that can be done must be done to support the students of TPS.”

My response:

I have been the TPS interim superintendent for less than three months. In a short time, we have made immense strides, as affirmed by the state board and even yourself. If the TPS board hires me, then I believe it is because they think that I can implement ALL NECESSARY CHANGES “to ensure the success of the district.” The TPS board is in the best position to decide who should be considered and who should be hired. That is the discretion that “local control” provides. I believe that it is highly telling that the Mayor of our City has called for my hiring. In addition, the TPS board has received significant community input from hundreds of Tulsa citizens supporting my candidacy for the superintendency. These persons include clergy, city councilors, district employees, a former interim superintendent of schools for TPS and a host of other renowned individuals. I doubt that there would be such resounding support for me if I did not meet the needs of our community. If I am fortunate to be hired for whatever time-period, I can tell you and your board members, with certainty, that no “culture of failure” will be tolerated on my watch.

One more comment of interest. There have been previous superintendents in TPS that were both appointed and selected from a national search. My research shows that there was perceived dissatisfaction with those that were selected through such a search compared to those appointed.

I am a native, skilled, and qualified Tulsan who has teaching, school leadership (including years of effective school turnaround), and district office leadership experience. I have and continue to receive countless awards nationally and locally.

As you were creating your Memo to our board and Mayor Bynum, my team was literally walking the halls of elementary schools in Tulsa with your OSDE team, and discussing strategies. Todd Loftin (OSDE Chief Academic Officer) alluded last Thursday, December 7, that there is good work and sound strategy happening right now in Tulsa Public Schools. We have upcoming meetings with Mr. Loftin and his team where we will look at the strategic work in the district alongside the expectations recently articulated by the OSDE Board. Also last week, our team met with the OSDE finance team and have followed up with a request to have bi-weekly meetings in order to ensure alignment on internal controls expectations between TPS and the OSDE.

Recent aggressive moves within my tenure of sixty days include the following bold, intentional actions: personnel decisions at the cabinet level; intentional, laser-like academic focus monitored through accountability measures; universal intervention that has been affirmed by the OSDE (Amira Learning and OSDE meetings to discuss TPS) and other literacy interventions; intentional, internal controls around finances, establishing an office of professional responsibility and announcement of leadership shifts; and analysis of what's best for our students and families in meeting their academic needs; rapid and comprehensive response to all formal and ad hoc requests from your team, such as the submission of 36 pages of data and responses to OSDE questions; presentations to Todd Loftin (OSDE Chief Academic Officer) and his team; meeting regularly with OSDE school improvement team members; and formally presenting to the OSDE State Superintendent and board monthly.

In closing, I want to be unequivocal in my insistence that partnership between you, your office, and Tulsa Public Schools is the only way we can achieve the success for students in Tulsa that we agree is our paramount responsibility. Consistency and shared accountability are the foundations of the trusting, mutually respectful relationship that will move Tulsa Public Schools forward. I am here and I am ready. I look forward to your support for the students, families, teachers, and staff of Tulsa Public Schools. They deserve that. Let's put them first and work together to provide quality learning experiences for our students.

With kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ebony Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "E".

Dr. Ebony Johnson
Interim Superintendent