



**LITTLE ROCK SCHOOL DISTRICT
810 WEST MARKHAM STREET
LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS 72201**

**MINUTES
SPECIAL BOARD MEETING
January 6, 2011**

The Board of Directors of the Little Rock School District held a special meeting on Thursday, January 6, 2011. The meeting was held in the Boardroom of the Administration Building, 810 West Markham Street, Little Rock, Arkansas. President Melanie Fox presided.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Melanie Fox
Jody Carreiro
Michael Nellums
Greg Adams
Charles Armstrong
Dianne Curry
Katherine Mitchell

MEMBERS ABSENT:

None

ALSO PRESENT:

Linda Watson, Superintendent
Beverly Griffin, Recorder of Minutes

I. Call to Order / Roll Call

Ms. Fox called the meeting to order at 5:35 p.m. Six members of the board were present at roll call; Mr. Armstrong arrived at 5:40 p.m.

PURPOSE OF THE MEETING

The meeting was called in response to a petition from citizens of the Little Rock School District. The purpose of their request was to address concerns regarding the separation of Dr. Linda Watson from the position of superintendent of schools.

The agenda also called for an executive session to discuss the employment of an interim superintendent.

CITIZENS COMMENTS

Dr. Anika Whitfield addressed the board and made opening comments regarding the purpose of the meeting. She expressed hope that their request for an open forum would provide an opportunity to learn and grow as a district, and to restore and rebuild the community's faith in the LRSD. She questioned the board's decision to buy out the remainder of Dr. Watson's contract, and requested that Dr. Watson be given an opportunity to complete the remainder of her term. It was her goal to help establish a new excellence for leadership and accountability in the LRSD.

The speakers are listed along with a brief synopsis of their comments:

- **Teresa Gordon** asked board members to listen to the speakers. It was her belief that Dr. Watson's administration had provided a level of calm in the schools . . . "teachers are able to teach and students are able to learn." She stated that the job required someone within the district who understands how to move in a new direction, someone who understands the history and the dynamics of the district.
- **Felicia Hayes**, a teacher at McDermott Elementary, read a portion of an email she sent to the board in November 2010. She thanked the board for their service and for the amount of time they contribute to serving on the board. She stated her strong support of Dr. Watson and she asked the board to consider the progress that had been made under Dr. Watson's tenure. She asked the board to consider their decision to dismiss Dr. Watson and asked for an explanation of their decision to replace her at this point in the school year.
- **Rev. Clarence Thornton**, pastor of Macedonia Missionary Baptist Church, stated appreciation for the opportunity to address the board and to present his opinion on the buy-out of Dr. Watson's contract. He reported that he is the parent of five children who attended the LRSD and had provided foster care for students who attend school in Little Rock. As a concerned parent and community leader, it was his belief that the direction the board had taken was not good, and that the decision should be reconsidered. Rev. Thornton closed with a prayer for healing, wisdom and unity.
- **Imam Johnny Hasan** opened his remarks by calling the board's attention to injustice. His belief was that there was no existing justification for firing Dr. Watson. He asked if evaluations and documents used to make the decision to terminate her would be made public, and if there was a system in place to evaluate the progress she had made or lack of progress if none had been made. He also asked the board to provide the criteria that would be used to appoint a new superintendent. He felt that hidden agendas, politics, and issues that have no benefit to the school district were behind the move to buy out Dr. Watson's contract.
- **Ms. Whitfield** returned to the podium and asked the board to reveal Dr. Watson's evaluation documents. She stated that Dr. Watson would waive her right to have her evaluation made public.
- **Will Dunn**, LRSD fifth grade teacher, reported that he had spoken previously at the December board meeting. He asked the board to consider how students perceive the discord among the board. He reported that teachers are required to collaborate in the schools in order to make their classrooms better, and that Dr. Watson improved the communication between the administration and the teachers. He felt the board should allow Dr. Watson to continue her service as superintendent of schools.
- **Faye Hansen**, gifted and talented specialist at Rockefeller, acknowledged the day as *The Feast of the Epiphany*. She asked the board to consider this as a unique opportunity to continue to build on the improvements made by Dr. Watson. She reported the instructional environment at Rockefeller had improved and she noted that during

Dr. Watson's tenure student achievement levels had increased, and there was reduced animosity between the teachers and the administration. She stated admiration for Dr. Watson's ability to handle things quietly without causing a spectacle, and without airing anyone's dirty laundry. She closed with a reminder: while our own personal passions and decisions are important, we are all interconnected.

- **Linda Pondexter Chesterfield**, former LRSD board member and current state representative, asked the board to reconsider their decision to terminate Dr. Watson's contract. Of note, she reminded the board that McClellan High School had achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on the state mandated tests. She spoke to the positive achievement on these tests across grade levels and across the district. She asked if there were a way to bring the community back together, to identify if there was something that Dr. Watson had not done, to talk about it, and to allow her to correct her mistakes and move on.

Dr. Whitfield made closing remarks, noting that most of the people in the audience were there in support of Dr. Watson and in support of the Little Rock School District. She thanked the board for giving them the opportunity to speak.

REMARKS FROM BOARD MEMBERS

Ms. Curry thanked those who attended to express their concerns. She expressed concerns of her own regarding the board's decision to terminate Dr. Watson, and suggested that the board should reconsider. She stated that even she didn't know all the reasons for termination, but suggested that everyone should be held accountable for the fiscal condition of the district and there should be justification for not allowing Dr. Watson to work through the end of her contract. She asked the audience to remain prayerful that what is done is right for our students and employees.

Mr. Adams expressed his belief that everyone in the room shares a passion for the well being of the district. He was pleased in the respectful interaction between the speakers and the board as an indication of how people of good intention interact even when they disagree. He briefly discussed sitting in the audience of his first board meeting, where the board was considering the reconstitution of Forest Heights. Although he was not on the board at the time the decision was made not to extend Dr. Watson's contract, he was in the audience for several months and noted that there was an obvious distance between Dr. Watson and some members of the board. He stated belief that in order to meet challenges and obstacles, there has to be a trusting collaborative relationship between the superintendent and the board. He called on the board to start again, and to move forward as positively as possible. He thanked Dr. Whitfield for her passion and demeanor in the communications with the board.

Mr. Nellums also expressed appreciation for Dr. Whitfield's professional and respectful tone in requesting information in this situation. He reported that he had also visited with Michael Coleman, a member of the audience, who only wants what is best for children. He expressed appreciation for the taxpayers who have a vested and continuing interest in the schools. He encouraged them to remain involved, to show up at local PTA meetings, open houses and extracurricular activities.

Dr. Mitchell reported that she had been on the board for twenty-two years and had witnessed a lot of superintendents during that time. She was pleased when Dr. Watson accepted the interim superintendent's position, and again when she assumed the permanent role. She noted positive improvements during Dr. Watson's tenure, including the district's participation in the application for the Promise Neighborhood grant. This grant will provide great opportunities not only for the children in the district, but for the parents, families and communities where the program will be implemented. Dr. Mitchell reported that she had not voted to terminate Dr. Watson's contract, and she stated belief that some board members were not in support of her from the beginning. She discussed the difficulty of finding effective, efficient superintendents and the good fortune for the schools in Arkansas to be in a positive financial condition. She closed by stating that she had no expectations for the board to rescind their action, but that she was praying for whomever the board chooses to serve as the interim.

Mr. Armstrong thanked the audience, and stated that "It takes a village" to raise our children. He encouraged positive involvement in the education of our children, asking the audience members to become and remain involved in our educational system. He asked that listeners look at ways to reduce the criticism and increase the cooperative efforts. He thanked Dr. Whitfield for being polite and respectful, noting that although they differ in opinion, they respect each other.

Mr. Carreiro commended members of the audience for the passion they hold for the children. He acknowledged the difficulty of making the hard decisions as a member of the board. He stated that although he doesn't respond to every email message, he does read the messages. Some of the emails requested a response, but he did not feel he could respond when information related to personnel matters was involved. He emphasized that he was not attempting to hide anything, but to ensure and respect the privacy of the individual.

He also clarified and restated previous comments: the board has used an evaluation instrument, a public document available from the Arkansas School Boards Association. He noted the difference between that document and the one used in the LRSD was the evaluation scale of 1-5 modified from the 1-3 scale on the ASBA document. He wanted to ensure there was no lingering misunderstanding that an evaluation had not been done. He expressed hope that the evaluation instrument could be improved and admitted that there is much to be improved in the evaluation process. He announced that there would be open community forums, and that he hoped the community would remain engaged and provide input as we move forward.

Ms. Fox thanked the audience and Dr. Whitfield for their comments, and encouraged them to remain involved as the process continues to fill the position of superintendent. She discussed briefly the board's requirements to hold personnel discussions in executive session and the agreement that discussions held in executive session must remain private. Regarding the request from speakers to reveal Dr. Watson's evaluation, she stated that since it was a personnel matter, the board could not lawfully disclose the evaluation documents, but that Dr. Watson could do so if she wished for them to be made public. In closing, Ms. Fox stressed that Dr. Watson was not fired, but that she was leaving under a mutually agreed upon separation agreement.

The board took a brief break at 6:47 p.m.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

The board returned from recess at 7:02 p.m. Mr. Armstrong made a motion to convene an executive session to discuss the employment of an interim superintendent. Mr. Nellums seconded the motion and it **carried unanimously**.

The board returned from executive session at 7:50 p.m. and reported no action was taken.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the board, the meeting adjourned at 7:50 p.m.

APPROVED: 01-27-11

Originals Signed by:
Melanie Fox, President
Michael Nellums, Secretary