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May 17, 2019

Dr. Lamont Repollet  
Commissioner  
New Jersey Department of Education  
PO Box 500  
Trenton, NJ 08625-0500

Re: South Orange-Maplewood School District  
Via Express Mail

Dear Commissioner Repollet:

I am writing to express grave concerns over the governance of the South Orange-Maplewood School District and administration of some of its schools. As you may know, the Black Parents Workshop is the principal plaintiff in a federal lawsuit (*Black Parents Workshop v. South Orange-Maplewood School District* Case 2:18-cv-02726) against the district in the U.S. District Court of the District of New Jersey alleging patterns of racially discriminatory practices. The Legal Department of the NAACP national headquarters in Baltimore recently authorized its Oranges-Maplewood branch (see attached statement) to file an *amicus curiae* brief in support of our litigation. Our litigation follows the district being cited by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) for practices denying African-American students from advanced-level and Advanced Placement (AP) classes and patterns of racial disparities in student discipline. The district signed a Resolution Agreement with OCR in 2014 that we maintain it has failed to comply with as promised. Our litigation also follows the filing of a civil rights

complaint with the Office for Civil Rights against the district by the ACLU, ACLU-NJ and the UCLA Civil Rights Project in 2014. (see attached)

The district has acknowledged in public meeting and in documents that its elementary schools are racially segregated and that African-American students are disproportionately enrolled in less rigorous classes in the district's Columbia High School. The erratic nature of the district's leadership has resulted in the superintendent position being a revolving door. The South Orange-Maplewood School District has had at least 6 interim or permanent superintendents in the last 20 years. The district recently announced the hiring of its 7<sup>th</sup> superintendent in the span, a permanent hire scheduled to begin work on July 1. The result of this ever-changing leadership has been disastrous for students in the district. During the last two decades we have witnessed:

- A Columbia High School teacher charged with the sexual assault of five African-American male students
- A paraprofessional in an elementary school convicted of charges related to public nudity and lewdness in front of students
- An elementary school with excessively high levels of lead in its drinking water. It is the elementary school with the largest proportion of African-American students
- Rodent infestation in Columbia High School
- Instances of lax security in school buildings exposed by a parent
- The continued use of 'portables' as classrooms despite the health and security hazard
- Fifth grade students in an elementary school enact a slave auction due to a poorly implemented colonial history lesson on American slavery
- African-American high school students criticized by white faculty after a dance performance to the theme of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit"
- A high school mathematics teacher who has a history of belittling African-American students in her class (see attached) and was a focus of the ACLU complaint filed with the OCR
- An African-American student in an elementary school placed in a closet by a teacher as punishment
- Columbia High School students stage a walkout to protest racial issues in the school
- Columbia High School student groups organizing an assembly to specifically address racial disparities and racism in their school
- Instances in which African-American students, specifically males, at Columbia High School being falsely accused of being under the influence of narcotics, and subjected to searches without the knowledge or consent of their parent and/or guardian
- Parents pursue litigation against the district that resulted in a settlement due to the bullying of their children by a baseball coach



- A sitting Board member determined to be in violation of the state's ethics code by the School Ethics Commission (*Fields v. Stephanie Lawson-Muhammad* Docket #C34-18)
- The School Ethics Commission chastising the Board of Education for failing to discuss the incident involving the Board Member in public session
- Insider deals allowing the president of the teacher's union to forego a teaching load and have access to an office in the high school
- Failure to enact a Student Code of Conduct that has resulted in subjective interpretation of alleged offenses
- Board Members who perpetually miss Board committee meetings and inactive committees
- An audit (attached) authorized by the interim superintendent of the district's attendance and credit recovery practices revealed that African-American students were disproportionately harmed by the mismanagement of the policies. We believe students may not have appropriately earned credit for diplomas that were conferred by the district.

Any of the above should be cause for alarm and raise a red flag. These episodes collectively reflect a dysfunctional school district. Sadly, these incidents are not an aberration. They are the result of a district in which Board politics and community interference for the granting of political favors sacrifices the interests of children.

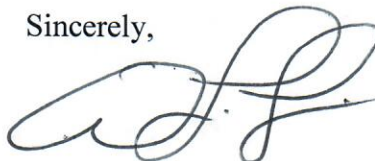
One such episode involved the recent resignation of the principal of Maplewood Middle School that was submitted to the Board. Maplewood Middle School is an underperforming school that should be placed on the state's Focus Schools list. The school received a 33.63 score under the state Department of Education's school grading system and the school has a significant racial achievement gap. By contrast, South Orange Middle School, once on the state's Focus School's list, was given a 63.65 score. Despite the obvious failure of the Maplewood Middle School's leader, factions in the community organized to pressure the Board to renew the principal's contract; despite her having submitted her resignation. In an unprecedented move, the Board classified the principal's resignation as a "resignation and renewal" on the public meeting agenda. We believe the resignation should have been classified as a "resignation and nonrenewal." The Board, without having a letter from the principal rescinding her resignation, never accepted the principal's resignation and then renewed her contract. The Board vote was 4-3. We are also aware of several affirmative action complaints that have been filed against the principal by staff and incidents in which she has targeted certain staff. Last year we represented a special education teacher who was targeted by this principal. It took the intervention of the

interim Superintendent to guarantee the teacher's contract renewal. In addition, we have represented a special education student in the school who was not being provided his legally entitled services.

The expanse of issues in the district leaves us with the impression that left to its own devices, the South Orange-Maplewood School District does not have the capacity or will to address its deficiencies. This is our reason for addressing our concerns to you. We are hopeful that short of the department acting as a monitor, that you will exercise your powers and authority as Commissioner and demand a full financial and operational audit of the district's operations under state supervision.

We are prepared to provide documentation, data and witnesses to attest to the claims that I have put forth in this correspondence. We are also prepared to present former students, teachers and administrators who will attest to the claims we have made in this correspondence. It is our wish that we might have the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our concerns in greater detail and to have our legal counsel present to explain our interpretation of how the district is in violation of state and federal laws. We are copying the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) on this correspondence as the school district is still under an open Resolution Agreement. I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Sincerely,



Walter Fields  
Chairman  
(973) 738-7876 – Direct

cc: Ms. Annemarie Maini, Board President  
Dr. Thomas Ficarra, Interim President  
Robert Tarver, Black Parents Workshop Legal Counsel  
U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights  
Hon. Teresa M. Ruiz, Chair, NJ Senate Education Committee  
Hon. Pamela R. Lampitt, Chair, NJ Assembly Education Committee  
Attachments/