



Coalition for Community
Schools - New Orleans



June 4, 2014

John White
State Superintendent of Education
Louisiana Department of Education
1201 North Third Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70802

Dear Superintendent White:

On May 15, the *Times-Picayune* reported that you referred to a civil rights complaint filed by New Orleans community groups as a “joke” and “political farce.” As Superintendent, you should take seriously and investigate any charge of discrimination that harms students of color in Louisiana. Your comments are reprehensible and prove you are not fit to be Louisiana State Superintendent of Education. Therefore, we demand your immediate resignation.

The discriminatory effects of school closures that students of color and their families experience in New Orleans are no laughing matter. We find no humor in our school communities being dissolved, no amusement in being forced to send our children to charter schools that are unaccountable to our families, and no comedy in schoolchildren waiting outside before sunrise for school buses to take them across the city because we have no neighborhood schools left. It is with utmost seriousness that we have called for a civil rights investigation of the harmful school closure policies that have shuffled countless black and brown children from failing schools to other failing or near-failing schools, year after year.

Under your department, the Recovery School District has suffered the following harms:

- More than 30 traditional public schools have closed in the last several years.
- Last week, the district’s five remaining public schools closed, making it the nation’s first all-charter school district.
- Of the students impacted by this latest round of school closures, approximately 1,000 are black. Only five are white.
- Many students, mostly children of color, have experienced multiple school closures.
- The majority of Recovery School District schools are ranked “C,” “D,” or “F.”

Communities of color are forced to bear the burdens of these damaging policies, with no neighborhood schools in New Orleans that serve majority black neighborhoods. When schools close, students lose crucial community relationships, have their educations painfully interrupted

and are often pushed into failing or near-failing schools. As a result of selective admissions practices, these black and brown students are often not admitted to “A” and “B” schools. African-American students are over 80 percent of the student population in New Orleans, but only around 30 to 47 percent of the population at most of the high-performing schools.

Closing schools often forces students to travel further for their education. In February, a six-year-old boy was killed crossing the street early one morning to catch the school bus. In 2010, a female student was raped as she walked home from school. Many students in New Orleans East have to catch the bus as early as 5:30am to travel to their schools.

The New Orleans community has been very vocal about these harms. Last year, a mother filed a civil rights complaint documenting them. Your department did not investigate her claims. Despite repeated protests and complaints about school closures and pro-charter policies, you have dismissed these concerns – and along with it the lived experiences of countless families. That you would now refer to this current civil rights complaint as “a joke” further shows your disregard for the discrimination experienced by students of color and their parents. We have had enough of your misguided, paternalistic policies and request your immediate resignation.

Your real allegiance is to the pro-charter, pro-privatization agenda. It has become clear that you will lie, bribe, and turn a blind eye to discrimination to benefit this agenda. In 2011, you told the parents and students of John McDonogh Sr. High School that they would have to convert from a direct-run school to a charter school in order to receive \$35 million in much-needed renovations. After they agreed, you failed to provide these funds.

The May 13th civil rights complaint was filed by New Orleans community members – people who have advocated for students for decades – in collaboration with Journey for Justice, an alliance of grassroots organizations advocating for neighborhood public schools across the country. New Orleans partners include Coalition for Community Schools (CCS) and Conscious Concerned Citizens Controlling Community Changes (C-6). To mischaracterize the complaint as being “dominated” by teachers unions, as you did according to media reports, is not only incorrect but another example of your dismissal of the voices of communities and families.

Your irresponsible comments make you unsuitable to be State Superintendent of Education. There is no place in the education of children for individuals like you, Mr. White. We respectfully request your immediate resignation and a moratorium on school closures.

Sincerely,

Frank J. Buckley, C-6
Karran Harper Royal, CCS

CC: Anurima Bhargava
Chief
Educational Opportunities Section
U. S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division
601 D Street NW, Suite 4300
Washington, DC 20004

Catherine Lhamon
Assistant Secretary
Office for Civil Rights
U. S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

Charles Roemer
President
Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
1201 North Third Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70802