

**Wilmington Education
Improvement Commission**
Solutions for Delaware Schools

February 1, 2017

The Honorable John Walsh
The Honorable Stephanie Bolden
Co-Chairs, Joint Legislative Oversight and Sunset Committee (JLOSC)
149th Delaware General Assembly
Dover, DE 19901

Chairman Walsh and Chairwoman Bolden:

I am writing to offer my support of the Delaware State Board of Education as the Joint Legislative Oversight and Sunset Committee (JLOSC) conducts its review of the DSBE work and value in the broader landscape of public education in Delaware. As I understand your objectives, the JLOSC is required to pursue the following:

“JLOSC performs periodic legislative review of agencies, commissions or boards. The purpose of the review is to determine whether or not there is a genuine public need for the agency and, if so, determine if the agency is effectively performing to meet that need. The purpose of this chapter is not to terminate agencies which are sufficiently meeting a recognized State need and which are accountable to and responsive to the public interests. Rather, the purpose is to use the review mechanism to strengthen and support these agencies.”¹

Given this mandate, I thought it would be useful to detail my experience with the DSBE since Governor Markell appointed me Chairman of Wilmington Education Advisory Committee (WEAC) in the fall of 2014 and the Delaware General Assembly passed House Bill 148 in the Spring of 2015, which created the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission (hereinafter referred to as “The Commission”). I was also appointed by Governor Markell to chair the Commission.

As you know, the Commission was created to advise the Governor and the General Assembly on issues related to equitable education for disadvantaged children in Wilmington and throughout the State of Delaware. In 2015, we identified three specific populations of students with whom to focus our work:

- Low-income Delaware students as defined by their eligibility for free or reduced lunch (50 percent of the Delaware student population);
- English Language learners, the state’s fastest growing student population; and
- Special needs students in kindergarten through the third grade, the only population of special needs students who receive no state-sponsored student support to help them and their teachers during these substantively critical years.

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In each case, our primary objective is to improve student outcomes by ensuring that they have the proper resources in and outside of schools to be successful, all of which we have delineated in two seminal reports, [*Solutions for Delaware Schools \(2015\)*](#), and [*Strengthening Wilmington Education: An Action Agenda \(2014\)*](#). As such I will not detail those recommendations here.

We have also pursued a strategy to streamline school governance in Wilmington. In Spring of 2015, the 148th General Assembly approved Senate Bill 122, a bill to develop a transition, implementation and resource plan to reconfigure the governance of Wilmington Schools as outlined in [*Strengthening Wilmington Education: An Action Agenda*](#). Once the plans were developed, the Commission was to present to the DSBE, who would determine the efficacy of those plans and ultimately vote as to their adequacy for final approval by the General Assembly. In context, this was an enormous role for DSBE as their action would represent the first time that any state-sponsored body, including the General Assembly or the Office of the Governor, would affirmatively act to better serve Wilmington students since the historic U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board* (1954).

To their credit, DSBE took that responsibility seriously, putting the Commission through a series of unprecedented steps to ensure that they were comprehensively aware of our plans and their value to the students and parents of the Wilmington community. That included not only a thorough review of the 1,000 pages of analysis that shaped the Commission's plans, but also a call by the DSBE for the Commission to answer more than 50 additional questions in writing, which resulted in a public forum between me and the DSBE members that lasted more than four hours. It was unmistakably clear that the DSBE would be notably dogged in their deliberations to ensure that both the Commission and they were safeguarding the most marginal student population in Delaware.

To be clear, many members of the Commission including me grew weary of what became a long-suffering process to a final, narrow 4-3 vote to support our plan, but it was one example – and in some ways the best example -- of how seriously the DSBE and its chair Dr. Teri Gray took their role. As I have now said in public many times and put in writing to Dr. Gray and the DSBE members on January 21, 2016:

“You [Delaware State Board of Education] have taken great care in exercising due diligence in considering the importance and limited power of the State Board of Education to redraw the lines for the first time in 40 years. You have asked hard, thoughtful questions, pressed us on impact on student achievement that will result from this initial step, affirmed your commitment to Delaware children, and grounded your inquiry and deliberations in fact-finding and evidence.”

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Their decision ultimately compelled the General Assembly to act, and I believe has kept clear pressure on the legislature, the Governor, the Department of Education and the public school system itself to make equitable education for all Delaware children a strategic priority for our state. My sense is that this is in many ways what the DSBE is designed to do. And that function continues to have significant merit in our educational landscape.

This is not to suggest that the DSBE cannot be tweaked to better serve the system and the students and families who consume these services, but rather to note that in its purest sense, it has unique accountability. In my view and in my direct experience with the DSBE, they have executed with caution and great care. As you review their ongoing utility and offer recommendations to strengthen their role and supports, I would be happy to add additional comments along those lines. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Tony Allen, Ph.D.
Chairman

cc: Joint Legislative Oversight and Sunset Committee Members
The Honorable [David Sokola](#)
The Honorable [Bryan Townsend](#)
The Honorable [Brian Pettyjohn](#)
The Honorable [Bryant Richardson](#)
The Honorable [Gerald Brady](#)
The Honorable [Andria Bennett](#)
The Honorable [Timothy Dukes](#)
The Honorable [Jeff Spiegelman](#)

The Honorable John Carney, Governor
The Honorable Susan Bunting, Secretary, Department of Education

Dr. Teri Gray and members of the Delaware State Board of Education

Wilmington Education Improvement Commission Members
Dr. Dan Rich, Commission Policy Director