

January 14, 2025

To: Memphis Shelby County Board of Education

Re: Official Response to Board Resolution dated December 17, 2024

Education is more than textbooks—it is the lifeblood of a city. It shapes who we are and who we become. It’s how businesses choose where to invest, families decide where to plant their roots, and communities find hope in making dreams come true. **Strong schools build strong children and strong cities.**

When I accepted this role on February 9, 2024, I did so with one goal: to make the District the engine of transformation for Memphis. I shared that the right leader, at the right place, at the right time changes everything knowing that transformation is both a privilege and a burden. I knew it would require hard work, a strong team, and a commitment to put students first—always. But I also knew this: when you are committed to doing hard work, your leadership is inconvenient, and comfort is never the companion of progress.

I have learned a difficult truth over the past few months. Facts, transparency, and even integrity hold little weight and are overshadowed by noise. That truth came into sharp focus on December 17, 2024, when Board Chair Coleman called the city together to terminate my contract. I sat through hours of agonizing disrespect and defamatory attacks that cut deeply as leader who worked tirelessly to rise in the ranks and as a Black woman who knows all too well what it feels like to have your competence questioned, your intentions distorted, and your dignity dismissed.

Despite Chair Coleman’s claim that I fail to communicate critical information, the facts paint a very different picture: 3,685 minutes equating to more than 61 hours of phone calls alone with board members, over 700 text messages, 250 emails, 21 weekly newsletters, and more than 40 in-person huddles—all in just six months, July through December 2024. Every email, every meeting, every message was an effort to collaborate, build trust, and keep this district moving forward. And yet, the truth was drowned out by false narratives designed to divide us.

The most painful accusations weren’t about emails or meetings, they were about my character. My integrity. My humanity. As a certified counselor in multiple states, I’ve spent years supporting those in crisis including this morning as we mourn the loss of yet another student. On a Saturday morning early fall, I spent 45 minutes on the phone with an employee who reached out to me with the subject line, “Suicidal Employee.” Making such a disgusting insinuation was not just cruel, it was a betrayal of every person who looks to this district for support and hope.

The challenges of leadership don’t define you, how you respond does. And through all of this, I’ve remained professional, collaborative, and kept my eyes on the main thing: showing up every day to ensure students have access to the kind of education that opens doors, ignites dreams, and transforms lives and our principals, teachers, and leaders have the resources to ensure the same. And as long as I have the privilege of serving this community, I will fight for that promise with everything I have. Which is why I am still here: the 901 deserves nothing less.

A thorough review of the facts will demonstrate that I acted transparently, within the scope of the responsibilities of the superintendent, and in alignment with relevant laws and policies as stated by the [Tennessee Department of Education and Office of the Comptroller](#). And while I do not expect fairness or impartiality from everyone in this room, my integrity and my commitment to this district demand that I not allow facts to be drowned out by false accusations and political maneuvering. What troubles me is that the truth might not matter even after I lay out the facts against the claims against me. And yet, I will do just that.

Claim One

Superintendent misled the Board and the public when she stated during a Board Work Session that the District had paid employees \$1 million in overtime wages for time not worked. Superintendent never presented any evidence suggesting that her statement was true, and she did not correct or clarify her statement to the public.

Response

As further detailed below, the superintendent's statements regarding overtime waste and abuse were accurate based on documented fiscal reports shared with the Board and consistent with district policy.

[MSCS Policy 2018](#) Fraud, Abuse, Waste is clear that abuse includes behavior that is unreasonable and constitutes unnecessary business practices given the facts and circumstances and waste is the careless or needless expenditure of District funds. Based on the superintendent's review of overtime records and expenses related to overtime, ([2022](#), [2023](#), and [2024](#)), it was clear that prior approval for overtime was not being obtained regularly and there was a history of failure to properly record and document overtime, which clearly constitutes abuse and waste as defined by policy 2018 and [4059 overtime](#). This is further supported by the mere fact that overtime expenses have decreased by \$1 million (December 2023-December 2024) since the [internal control measures](#) and enhanced supervisory oversight were implemented under the superintendent's leadership. Despite the Board's unsupported claim, this is a clear indication of tangible results and improved fiscal responsibility and operational efficiency.

A review of policy 2018 would have made it clear that "waste" and "abuse" do "not necessarily involve fraud." Nonetheless, the superintendent further explained what she meant by waste during the July 30, 2024 Business Meeting:

... When I mentioned abuse, I was referring to inefficiencies and waste...

- a) Recognizing the opportunity to strengthen internal controls and processes, the superintendent asked the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) to develop a [form](#) for internal use to include the signature of the immediate supervisor, CFO, and superintendent. Department leads communicated the internal process for overtime approval aligned with policy, and a policy edit was recommended to the Board include the superintendent's approval for overtime as a final measure.
- b) Other than [one email](#) from then Board Chair Althea Greene, the Board demonstrated no interest in reviewing additional information when offered by the superintendent.
 - a) Board Members Natalie McKinney, Towanna Murphy, and Sable Otey were not school board members during this time and neither board member has inquired about overtime since their tenure beginning August 29, 2024.

Through the power provided by the Board, as director of schools, it is the responsibility of the superintendent to ensure that all district funds are managed with the utmost integrity and accountability, preventing waste and misuse while strategically aligning resources to achieve the

district's educational goals and priorities. As stated above, from December 2023 to December 2024, overtime expenses are currently down by \$1 million.

Claim Two

Superintendent accepted a donation of more than \$45,000.00 without Board approval. At a Board Work Session, Superintendent misrepresented her knowledge of and involvement in depositing the unapproved donation check in violation of Board Policy.

Response

First, the District's receipt and processing of a \$45,635.33 donation from School Seed Foundation did not violate Board policy because it was presented to the Board for acceptance promptly upon the superintendent's knowledge of the District's receipt of the same. Further, as confirmed by the Tennessee Comptroller's Office, the donation was [processed by the Interim Business Financial Officer in accordance](#) with applicable Tennessee law and the responsibilities of the District's financial officer.

Second, the Board's claim of misrepresentation by the superintendent related to knowledge of and involvement in depositing the donation check is completely meritless. The Board fails to provide a single fact to support it. The Board has not and cannot demonstrate that the superintendent knew about the donation check or that the superintendent was involved in receiving or depositing the donation check because the superintendent had no knowledge or involvement in the process. While the superintendent wears many hats, check processing is not one of them.

As relevant here:

[MSCS Policy 2019](#) Grants, Gifts, Donations, and Sponsorship guides the receipt of donations for the district. Tennessee guides the district's receipt and management of funds.

1. Board Policy 2019 Grants, Gifts, Donations, and Sponsorship states "... \$15,000.00 and above: requires acceptance by the Board." The policy does not require that a donation be brought to or accepted by the Board within a specific timeframe.
2. The policy does not require Board acceptance before the funds are deposited. Rather, the policy speaks to providing notice of intended use, if feasible, prior to expending the funds (Section E, p.4).
3. Tennessee law, TCA 5-8-207, Section (a) requires funds to be deposited within three days after receipt:
*Every county official handling public funds shall be required to maintain an official bank account in a bank or banks within this state, and shall, **within three (3) days after the receipt by such county official of any public funds, deposit the funds to the credit of such county official's official bank account, or bank accounts.***
4. The superintendent learned of the donation on November 8, 2024, through General Counsel Justin Bailey when he informed the superintendent via phone call that "the Board is asking something about a check from School Seed that they didn't approve." The superintendent asked Mr. Bailey for additional information, sharing with him that

she did not have knowledge about his inquiry and that she was confident that he understood that the superintendent does not receive or process checks- a process that sits with Finance.

5. The superintendent (a) promptly presented the donation to the Board on November 19, 2024 for acceptance “for future leadership institute program expenditures;” (b) confirmed that the funds had not been used yet; and (c) informed the Board that the personnel responsible for processing the donation owned the responsibility of the oversight of not presenting the donation more promptly, although still complying with District policy. This was further shared with the Board by the Superintendent initially during the work session, [via email on November 21st](#) and again on [December 4th](#) as stated on record during the December 3, 2024 business meeting. The superintendent’s actions related to the donation were consistent with the fiduciary responsibilities of the role, Board policy, and Tennessee law.

The Board’s claims of policy violation and misrepresentation of the same by the superintendent fall flat.

Claim Three

Superintendent was dishonest with the Board and the public when she stated that certain federal grant funds were still available to the District despite Superintendent failing to obligate the funds prior to the required deadline.

Response

Ironically, this claim by the Board is an intentional misrepresentation to the public. The Board is undoubtedly aware that the funds in question were available at the time of their questioning. The funds were available as stated by the superintendent and [have since been State-approved](#) and allocated to the District.

The American Rescue Plan-Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) grant was first made available to State Education Agencies (SEA) in 2021. State agencies allocated a designated amount to all school districts (LEAs) across the state of Tennessee.

After one year of the grants, any remaining funds are accessible for the district to spend down, sent for approval by the superintendent on ePlan (state's website), and submitted for final approval of aligned activities to the Tennessee Department of Education. For Local Education Agencies (LEAs), any remaining funds available from the three-year grant had to be obligated (through an [executed contract or purchase order](#)) by the deadline of September 30, 2024.

The grant required an executed contract in place by September 30, 2024, or use of the funds for other allowable activities related to homelessness without the need for a contract. Because there was no contract in place by September 30, the funds were used for other allowable activities and approved by the Tennessee Department of Education.

The Board chose to rely on [misinformation](#).

Claim Four

We continue to wait for a comprehensive strategic plan for the district and a full explanation of the district restructuring. The superintendent's failure to provide this plan has caused confusion among parents, staff, and the board.

Response

Although this claim was not included in the original resolution posted for the public, during the December 17th meeting, Chair Coleman read the additional claim to the public. Therefore, the superintendent will address it all the same.

This claim is yet another misrepresentation to the public. Per [Policy 2001](#) Annual Operating Budget, the Board in conjunction with the superintendent shall establish priorities for the upcoming fiscal year by October. In alignment with policy, the strategic plan is informed by the priorities approved by the board once established.

The strategic plan has been prioritized for discussion and placed on the agenda for every scheduled Board retreat – [July 19-20](#), [November 14-15](#) – and subsequently canceled by the Board. Dates for September were not selected as the Board chose to singularly prioritize a mid-year evaluation for the superintendent. Therefore, the Board's contention that it "continue[s]" to wait for the strategic plan is not only false but disingenuous.

At the request of Chair Coleman, the superintendent refrained from sharing the draft strategic plan with Board members prior to the retreats; a request Chair Coleman also [communicated](#) to her colleagues. Furthermore, the superintendent [informed the Board](#) in September that the district continues to operate under multiple established plans from previous years, although not the desire for the district, until a new strategic plan is finalized and approved.

Restructuring Plan

Although many [personnel changes began before](#) the superintendent, and the Board had prior awareness of the sunset of ESSER funds impacting [more than 1,000 employees](#), the superintendent re-presented the district's [draft budget and reorganization structure](#) to the Board and more than 13,000 online viewers on June 13, 2024 explaining the support for each decision prior to budget approval. The organizational structure was also reviewed during individual huddles with Board Members in May. Additionally, the organizational structure was included in orientation binders and reviewed with new board members during orientation on September 5 as [one of many requested documents](#). Finally, the district's organization chart is [posted on the website](#) and updated monthly.

This claim is also false.

Claim Five – Communication with Valued District Partners

The resolution states, in part,

...Dr. Feagins' refusal to communicate and/or cooperate with valued District partners...

During the December 17th meeting, Chair Coleman publicly read aloud, in pertinent part,

...I have contacted elected officials at every level of government, and longtime partners of the district, and they are in support of the action I'm recommending.

Response

First, Chair Coleman's statement that elected officials and long-time partners support her recommended action deserves careful examination as it is contradicted by a vote of no confidence by the Shelby County Board of Commissioners, the multiple bills being considered by the State legislature for State control of Memphis-Shelby County Schools, and definitive statements by the Governor and Speaker of the House.

Moreover, the reality on the ground paints a different picture. Current local, state, and national support, and data directly from families, educators, and students overwhelmingly support the leadership of the superintendent and continuity in leadership. In an October survey conducted across the broader community, the straightforward question, "How's the Superintendent doing so far?" yielded results from nearly 10,000 respondents reflecting a positive perception about the superintendent.

Median scores were consistently at the highest rating (5) across all groups, reflecting strong approval among teachers, partners, community members, and students. Central Office staff showed a slightly lower mean, and median scores compared to other groups with a (4) and 3.45 respectively. The strongest support comes from Teachers and Community Partners.

Group	N	Mean	Median
Central Office Staff	1,817	3.45	4
Community Members	4,240	3.90	5
Partners	86	4.06	5
Students	1,160	3.77	5
Teachers	2,518	4.19	5
All Responses	9,821	3.88	5

Furthermore, our longstanding partners have reaffirmed their commitment to collaborating with the current administration to achieve shared goals, underscoring the trust and alignment we've

cultivated. Since September, the administration has successfully forged an additional 75 partnerships, expanding the district's network of support and resources.

During the superintendent's brief tenure, more than 40 monthly/quarterly huddles have taken place, engaging several groups: both Teacher Associations, Principal Association, Multilingual families, Special Education Advisors, Faith-Based organizations, PTO/PTA/PIE members, Foster Caregivers, Realtors, Business Leaders, Central Office, VIP Business Leaders, Higher Education institutions, New Teachers, VIP Family & Community groups, Legacy Builders, and numerous VIP Tours. Efforts that have served to strengthen relationships and fostered trust with thousands of individuals across all neighborhoods in the 901, creating a unified community dedicated to advancing educational excellence.

Quantitatively, the district has seen measurable gains under the current administration in five short months spanning July through December 2024:

- Rehired 255 former MSCS teachers.
- Increased Student Enrollment by 2.4% Year-to-Year
- Increased Student Attendance 93% to 94% Year-to-Year
- Increased student re-enrollments 77.2% to 79.5%
- Increased Dual Enrollment 2886 to 2966
- Increased Districtwide enrollment by 944 students from August 19 to August 26 because of *Hey Neighbor*.
- Decreased students involved in all fights by 11% compared to Quarter 1 in 2023-24.
- Invested \$7M in new musical instruments across the district (first time since the 1970s).
- Three Music Teachers awarded *Teacher of Excellence Award* through the *Country Music Association*.
- Increased Before/After Care enrollment from 2562 students enrolled to 2870.
- Exited 904 English Learners compared to 734 in 2023.
- Decreased Teacher Vacancy Rate by 1.7%
- Reduced Exceptional Education Teacher vacancies from 84 to 67.

These are not theoretical achievements; they are tangible, factual results rooted in collaborative efforts and steadfast leadership. It's important to recognize that progress requires collective alignment and accountability, not actions based on selective endorsements or incomplete narratives. A vote in favor of the resolution to terminate the superintendent's contract is a vote against these gains and the hard work invested by school and central office team members to achieve the same.

Second, the Superintendent has consistently communicated with and reported information and significant matters to the Board and public. The Board's claim of failing to promptly report critical information is completely false and dismisses the transparent communication protocols implemented and consistently practiced by the Superintendent in alignment with, and far

exceeding District policy and the practices recommended by the Council of Great City Schools (consists of the 78 largest urban districts across the country).

While [some members have refused to meet](#) with the superintendent, the superintendent has devoted more than 3,685 minutes equating to more than 61 hours via phone calls with nine Board Members from July 2024 through December 2024 alone, while effectively managing communication through multiple additional platforms and leading the largest district in the state:

1. Monthly Meetings

- a. Comprehensive reports presented during Committee, Board Work Session, and/or Board Business

2. Weekly Board Insight

- a. More than [35 weekly Board Insight emails](#) (during roughly 38 weeks total in the superintendent's tenure) sent to the board April-December 2024

3. Miscellaneous Emails

- a. Select [Emails beginning in February](#) keeping the Board informed immediately after being named to the position on February 9th.

4. Weekly Individual Huddles Initiating February 19, 2024

Huddles range from 30 minutes to three hours each when held in person.

- a. Current Board Members:
 - 1. Joyce Dorse Coleman- Mondays at 10am
 - 2. Amber Huett-Garcia- Thursdays at Noon
 - 3. Stephanie Love- Wednesdays/Flexible Outside of Therapy Days
 - 4. Michelle McKissack- Wednesdays at 2pm
 - 5. Tamarques Porter- Flexible Day and Time
 - 6. Keith Williams- Tuesdays at 1pm
- b. Former Board Members:
 - 1. Mauricio Calvo – Flexible Upon Request
 - 2. Althea Greene – Mondays at 10am
 - 3. Frank Johnson – Tuesdays at 11am
 - 4. Kevin Woods – Thursdays at 9am

5. Phone Calls and Text messages

- a. [View Log Here](#) (does not reflect all calls or messages)

Brief Overview of Available Calls/Messages July - December 2024			
Board Member	Minutes	Hours	Messages (9/19 - 12/16/2024)
Joyce Dorse Coleman	802	13 hours 22 minutes	166
Amber Huett-Garcia	705	11 hours 45 minutes	95
Stephanie Love	658	10 hours 58 minutes	84
Towanna Murphy (Sworn in 8/29/2024)	47		40
Natalie McKinney (Sworn in 8/29/2024)	464	7 hours 44 minutes	61
Michelle McKissack	474	7 hours 54 minutes	184
Sable Otey (Sworn in 8/29/2024)	79	1 hours 19 minutes	43
Tamarques Porter (Sworn in 8/29/2024)	81	1 hour 21 minutes	30
Keith Williams	139	2 hours 19 minutes	15
Kevin Woods (July 19-August 23)	113	1 hour 53 minutes	Unavailable
Mauricio Calvo (July 19-August 23)	31		Unavailable
Althea Greene (July 19-August 23)	92	1 hour 32 minutes	Unavailable
Total	3685	61 hours 25 minutes	718

- 6. **First 100 Days**
 - a. Comprehensive [100-day plan booklet](#) shared during the interview process as a candidate on December 15, 2023 reviewed individually with each Board Member the week of February 19, 2024
 - b. [Monthly updates](#) provided with all Senior Leaders following suit.

- 7. **Transition Team Report**
 - a. A [comprehensive transition report](#) delivered to and shared with the Board and public on July 10.

- 8. **Quarterly Impact Report**
 - a. Comprehensive monitoring [report implemented by the superintendent](#) for transparency with the Board and public regarding the impact of the District's partnerships and contracts.

- 9. **Quick Find Document**
 - a. [District Docs One-Pager](#) shared with the Board and community

- 10. **Quarterly Reports**
 - a. [Superintendent's Q1 Report](#) and [Q2 Report](#) provides an overview of district improvements, needs, and accomplishments during semester one. This is a new effort implemented by the superintendent for transparency and to strengthen communication with the Board and community.

In closing, let me be unequivocally clear: these claims are false—not because I say so, but because the facts make it indisputable and prove false the inflammatory accusations. At the conclusion of the December 17th meeting, Board Chair Coleman stated, “we want to be fair.” Yet, nothing about this process, or my tenure, has embodied fairness. The months leading to the December 17, 2024, meeting and now to this evening have been fundamentally flawed and carried out with a deep commitment by many current and former board members to publicly shame me, create a hostile environment, cause public distrust at every turn of my tenure, and divide a district that is on the rise.

Although I inherited what the previous interim leader described as a “mess,” I have been expected to make a miracle in less time than is required to birth a healthy child. While I have made tough decisions, my actions have consistently been transparent, in good faith, aligned with district policies and priorities, and grounded in an unwavering focus on doing what is right for students, families, and staff.

A “yes” vote to terminate my contract will not be grounded in the merit of the claims—it will signify that this is and has always been about something entirely different. To the board members who see through this and are prepared to vote against termination, I thank you for your dedication to integrity and to the progress we are making as a district. To those who remain undecided, I ask for what you are asking the community for and what I ask every leader to provide for our students, a fair shot. In a society increasingly demanding immediate results, I also ask for time – time to deepen relationships, time to effectively address stubborn systemic issues that have existed for decades, time to allow the improvements made to continue taking root and bearing fruit, and the time provided to me through my contract.

When I stepped into this role, I was ready to do whatever it takes to elevate the excellence of Memphis-Shelby County Schools with a Board committed to transformative improvement— a Board that believed in the potential of our community and the promise of its children. You called on a leader ready to meet this challenge, and I have worked tirelessly with the District community to do the hard, necessary work of delivering on the promise of a better future for every student. I remain focused on continuing the good work together.

If this is about doing what is right, I urge the Board to resist the distractions of short-term politics and personal agendas and lean into the voices of the broader community we represent as your vote is bigger than me. It is about families who deserve to believe in the promise of better opportunities. It’s about the city we will leave behind for the next generation. If the decision is otherwise, I am grateful for the thousands of supporters locally and nationally who have sent encouragement, prayers, and flowers; for my Legacy Builders and many of our students who shared encouragement and advice for “when you are getting bullied;” and for the 901 who unified across social class, political affiliation, and neighborhood to stand tall for education.

I am at peace knowing that I was the right leader, at the right place, at the right time. And *that* changed everything.

In partnership,

Marie N. Feagins, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Memphis Shelby County Schools