

August 24, 2020

Dear Superintendent Johnson,

Thank you for your letter. I would have preferred to address this matter with you privately, nevertheless, here we are. I'll begin with this quote from Dr. King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail (1963)* – the text to which I alluded in my tweet and well-known by those more than casually familiar with his work;

“Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will”

Despite ample evidence to the contrary, I assume your letter constitutes the former rather than the latter. Let me state unequivocally, I reserve the right to speak in my own voice on issues of race and politics on whatever platform I so choose. In an atmosphere filled with complaints about “cancel culture” and “political correctness”, I assume you can appreciate this. But beyond that, Mr. Superintendent, it's what I do professionally and personally. It is part of my calling.

I confess I do not follow the logic of a Republican State Superintendent taking issue with private comments of an unaffiliated State Board member over his misgivings about the Democratic Party. It begs the question, “If not partisanship, what truly bothers you most about my comments?”

I'm well aware of the responsibility my position of leadership carries on the State Board of Education. Having been the 2014 North Carolina Teacher of the Year and inhabiting this body for 39 years, I know full-well my actions are under intensified scrutiny. That said, I found your accusations to be poorly-framed and unscrupulous.

First of all, I reject the assertion I equated all swing voters to “racists” and rebuke such a willfully obtuse position. Your response, however flawed, is not unique when the phrase “white supremacy” is used. For you, this term represents only the most abhorrent and disgusting acts of bigotry and prejudice. For many Black people like myself and other folks of color, we use it to describe the specific way systemic racism functions to treat white people in a superior fashion at the structural and institutional level. We see this racialized hierarchy in our housing, criminal justice, healthcare (particularly in the wake of COVID-19) and even our education system.

While you might find yourself inflamed by this rhetoric, I assure you it is standard nomenclature for those adept at discussing race issues. But, the brittle nature of your response indicates a major growing edge for a leader in your capacity.

Secondly, the mere notion that anyone is “without bias” is antithetical to equity work. Everyone has biases, including you, Mr. Superintendent. Socially locating ourselves and the various statuses we hold becomes all-the-more important. I am a Black male education professional, the grandson of sharecroppers, and a descendant of enslaved Africans in America. This informs everything I do. An equity lens is needed by all to engage every matter critically, that asks questions about who is most/least advantaged by our decisions on the Board and why.

Lastly, it’s ironic, but your letter reveals the importance of the Strategic Planning Committee and the State Board of Education in general. It illuminates the urgent need to feature equity prominently as one of our guiding principles, and provides a glimpse into how power structures might respond when the status quo is challenged. You’ve provided clarity for why equalizing educational opportunity for historically marginalized groups must be our top priority as we chart a path forward. For that, I say thank you Mr. Superintendent. Despite your brief stint in the classroom you’ve made this a teachable moment for the whole state.

As the State Board endeavors to adopt a Strategic Plan Framework and Equity Resolution in September, this incident as well as your letter have generated much needed conversation about what communities are least well-served by our current system and what we are committing ourselves to do about it. While we may have differing worldviews and politics, I’m sure we can both agree this is where we as North Carolinians ought to be directing our attention.

Yours in Equity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James E. Ford". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a long vertical line extending downwards from the end.

James E. Ford
North Carolina State Board of Education
Southwest Region Representative