

Statement

Walter L. Fields

School Ethics Commission Docket #C34-18

March 26, 2019

The New Jersey School Ethics Commission has ruled in my complaint under Docket #C34-18, Walter L. Fields v. Stephanie Lawson-Muhammad. I brought this complaint over concerns that a public official, elected to represent the interest of children in Maplewood and South Orange, had abused her position and failed to live up to the standard we should expect of our elected officials. The Commission agreed and I applaud their decision.

This complaint was brought with no personal animosity against Ms. Lawson-Muhammad or pursued in a frivolous manner. The School Ethics Commission made that clear in its findings over the course of their examination of the issues in this matter. I am thankful to the Commission for their objectivity in reviewing my complaint.

Today, I am releasing the audio recording of the November 27, 2018 School Ethics Commission hearing during which Ms. Lawson-Muhammad and I testified. I am also releasing a transcript of the hearing that was produced electronically from the audio recording. I am releasing both in the spirit of transparency.

In an era in which relations between law enforcement and the Black community is tense and fragile, and in a town that has experienced an incident of abusive policing, it is important that we speak truthfully when law enforcement officers conduct themselves in a professional manner and treat Black civilians with respect. That was the case with South Orange Police Officer Shaun Horst during his traffic stop of Ms. Lawson-Muhammad on April 27, 2018. The officer displayed grace, patience and consideration throughout his encounter with Ms. Lawson-Muhammad. For those that claim they want police to be accountable to citizens, this officer should be applauded for his conduct.

Ms. Lawson-Muhammad was in the wrong – speeding in a residential neighborhood during a time of day when children were en route to school, identifying herself as a School Board member, asking the officer which town he worked for and then, learning he was a South Orange police officer, suggesting she was going to call the president of South Orange Village, asking the officer if he would call her daughter’s school to inform the school her daughter would be late, cursing at the officer when he inquired about her health, driving without an insurance card, suggesting she could not go to court when she was issued a traffic summons, and then calling the chief of police of South Orange Village a “skinhead cop chief.”

If a Black youth had behaved in this manner, he or she would have been widely ridiculed. If the officer was Black and the motorist was a white School Board member, the Black community would have been rightly upset. Black children in our school district have been suspended for lesser offenses. Race and the issue of racial profiling is not relevant in this matter. Ms. Lawson-Muhammad’s behavior was driven by her attempt to use her public position and standing to influence a police officer in the discharge of his duties. During the November 27, 2018 hearing Ms. Lawson-Muhammad admitted that she never personally apologized to Officer Horst. **It is clear she would have never acknowledged her behavior had this incident not become public.** Her actions prompted the South Orange Village Trustees to express their concern to the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education and for the village president to issue a public statement to assure the public she was not in the business of fixing tickets.

At the time this incident became public I called for the resignation of Ms. Lawson-Muhammad from the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education. Today, I call upon the Board of Education to follow its own policy and remove Ms. Lawson-Muhammad from her position. Board policy under Prohibited Acts under its Bylaws clearly states:

“No Board member shall use or attempt to use his or her official position to secure unwarranted privileges, advantages, or employment for him or herself, members of his or her immediate family, or other.”