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Office of Governor

PO Box 001

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April 9, 2019

Dear Governor Murphy,

The South Orange, Maplewood Community Coalition on Race questions the NJ School Ethics Commission’s capacity to serve its constituency equitably. Appointed and elected commissions and boards have the power to make decisions that significantly affect the daily lives, opportunities, and future well-being of people, and as such should reflect the diverse experiences of those over whom they have such power. It is troubling to find decision-making bodies that are significantly more homogeneous than the communities they are entrusted to represent. We find that to be the case with the NJ School Ethics Commission.

A critical component of working toward true racial inclusion is being intentional about racial representation among those in leadership roles and serving on committees—especially those in positions of making decisions that affect entire communities. The profound lack of diversity and representation on the NJ School Ethics Commission—at a time when many are questioning the state’s commitment to integrated schools and communities, at a time when we need to be working jointly to counter the state’s status as one the most segregated in the nation—is particularly problematic.

There is a serious deficiency in the racial composition of this decision-making body: the NJ SEC is an appointed group of nine that currently includes only white men from municipalities that are mostly lacking in New Jersey’s racial diversity. We question the commission’s ability to give due consideration of the perspectives of people of color and women, and consequently to rule fairly and without bias in the case involving SOMSD BOE member Stephanie Lawson Muhammad. A significant amount of the Board's written opinion and deliberation on the recommended length of suspension focused on their board assessment of whether or not a black woman feared a police officer. As not a single member has the life experience of a woman or person of color, their systematic dismissiveness of those claims displays bias.

Moreover, the revelation, if accurate, that one of the commission was in law enforcement and was indicted for first-degree manslaughter after shooting a black man in the back in 2002 (the charge was later dismissed), betrays the commission’s extreme poor judgement in allowing that member to deliberate on this case. How is it possible not to have demanded his recusal in a case involving a black woman expressing fear about the police in the context of increased national and local dialogue about the disproportionate use of force on black persons? The commission’s decision to allow him to pass judgement in such a case only serves to deepen the conviction of many that those in positions of power do not have the best interests of people of color in mind.

We urge you, Governor Murphy, to review the membership of this appointed commission, along with others, so that we can in good faith work together toward what we hope is the mutual goal of building and sustaining integrated communities and schools throughout the state of New Jersey.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Marchman, Chair Nancy Gagnier, Executive Director

Cc: Dr. Lamont Repollet, Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Education