

Dr. Lamont Repollet
Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Education

The Honorable Phil Murphy
Governor, The State of New Jersey

Re: School Ethics Commission Ruling on Stephanie Lawson-Muhammad

Dear Governor Murphy and Commissioner Repollett,

We are a community-based collective of parents, families, and residents that work on issues regarding race and inequality in South Orange and Maplewood. We believe the School Ethics Commission's choice to dismiss, discount, and disbelieve Ms. Lawson-Muhammad shows a lack of awareness, an abdication of duty, a failure of understanding, and a lack of respect for the experiences of African Americans here and nationwide. We detail our specific points of disagreement with the commission's findings below.

We find it egregious that, as reported by *The Intercept*, a former law enforcement officer who killed an unarmed black man was actively involved in overseeing and making a determination in the ruling against Ms. Lawson-Muhammad. If members of the School Ethics Commission were considered school officials, this decision itself would be a violation of the School Ethics Act. We believe that the advisory opinion should be outright vacated on this basis alone.

The commission's decision comes at a time when the community had moved on from this issue. This ruling has re-animated division and distraction and aims to deprive our community and our children of a volunteer who was working to serve them. **We'd also like to note that our initial online letter supporting Ms. Lawson-Muhammad was signed by well over 1,000 community members** (<https://www.change.org/p/soma-board-of-education-soma-justice-demands-investigation-and-rejects-call-for-lawson-muhammad-resignation>).

Additionally, you should be aware of the concerns around the release of the video that showed the interaction between Ms. Muhammad and a police officer. You should know that an unknown officer sent an unsolicited copy of the video to Mr. Fields. Given that local police have in the past withheld requested camera footage from the public *and* that Ms. Muhammad's minor children are visible in the unredacted video, we consider this to be an unethical act with the intended desire to influence local politics and endanger Ms. Muhammad.

While the original incident had little or no impact on any police officer, the unauthorized release of the video has resulted in death threats to Ms. Lawson-Muhammad and physical intimidation towards her family.

We disagree with the premises of the decision against Ms. Lawson-Muhammad in the following ways:

- 1. The Commission voted on August 28 to find that the Complaint against Ms. Muhammad “was not frivolous in accordance with the standard set forth...More specifically, the Commission found no evidence that Complainant filed the Complaint in bad faith solely for the purpose of harassment, delay or malicious injury”.*

You should know that Mr. Fields has a pattern of targeting women in positions of authority in our community. This case has distracted our Board of Education from educational issues, pained the neighbors who have witnessed Ms. Lawson-Muhammad’s anxiety and distress, created conflict and division in our school district, and, as mentioned above, resulted in violent threats against Ms Muhammad. You should know that while Mr. Fields purports to speak for “Black parents,” many Black parents in our community have noted that he does not represent their views.

- 1. According to the report, the Commission “ does not find Respondent’s testimony about why she immediately identified herself as a Board member (i.e. safety concerns) to be credible or convincing”.*

When a Black woman tells you she is afraid of police, believe her.

The NJ.com Force Report notes that police use force more often and more severely against Black residents -- *even though Black New Jerseyans are less likely than their white neighbors to threaten police*, In Ms. Lawson-Muhammad’s school district of Maplewood-South Orange, police have the highest and most racially discriminatory rates of use-of-force in the state. In one recent high profile case, police profiled, targeted, and brutally beat Black teens. Local Black residents recount stories of being surveilled, treated as outsiders, stopping and questioned by police as though they do not belong in their own towns. Ms. Lawson-Muhammad noted that she herself has witnessed incidents of police abuse, and is personally acquainted with a victim. Black residents may rightly fear that police will treat them as threats to be subdued rather than as citizens to be served and protected.

1. *The Commission “finds that when Respondent identified herself as a Board member at the outset of a routine traffic stop, she was attempting to leverage that position to avoid the issuance of a summons.”*

We believe Ms. Lawson-Muhammad when she says that when an officer pulled her over for speeding on a day when she was otherwise under stress, she was anxious, and spoke quickly to establish that she is a resident and community member, as evidenced by her volunteer Board of Education service. We -- her neighbors and members of the community she serves -- believe her.

The Commission’s lack of respect for Ms. Lawson-Muhammad’s perspective shows them to be oblivious to the day-to-day reality of life for Black residents in our communities.

1. *The Commission “does not find Respondent’s testimony about the reasons she referred to Ms. Collum during the traffic stop to be credible or consistent with the evidence” and takes her to have been “unethically invoking her. . . relationship with Ms. Collum.”*

Ms. Lawson-Muhammad says that she perceived the citation process as unfair and - as a resident of the town -- would report the perceived unfairness to her elected representative, Village President Sheena Collum. This is the right of any citizen and resident, and should be no less true for town volunteers.

1. *The Commission judged Ms. Lawson-Muhammad on the way she expressed herself to the officer. They claim it was “inappropriate” to say that police “hurt black people” and to refer to an officer who was not present at the scene as “a skinhead” was a racial epithet.*

Saying officers in our towns “hurt Black people” is a true statement of an ongoing pattern and a fact of life in our communities.

In regards to “skinhead” -- this term was directed at someone who was not even involved in this stop, so we find it irrelevant to the Commission’s investigation or findings here. But, as a point of fact, skinheads are not a race -- they are an affinity group.

(One which has numerous chapters in New Jersey, and is among the groups known to the FBI to be infiltrating police departments. <https://to.pbs.org/2HmGjwT>)

1. *Finally, the Commission notes that “the public” “perceived Respondent’s actions as compromising to the Board.*

We are members of the public, and we disagree. Ms. Lawson-Muhammad's interaction with the officer, in and of itself, had no impact on her service as a Board of Education volunteer.

The ruling from this board of all-male, predominantly white and Republican political appointees undermines the valid work of police reform in NJ and disregards the well-justified and well-documented concerns regarding police interactions with Black residents. The commission should better reflect the diversity of New Jersey so that it can produce determinations that are fair, thoughtful, and better represents our state.

Please do the right thing and vacate this unfair and fallacious ruling. Allow our community to move on and recover.

SOMA Justice, including:

Heather Craven

Khadijah Costley White, PhD

Nina Essel, MSW, MS Ed

Susan Bergin, JD, MPA

Shannon Kirk, MAT TSWD

Kelly Piccola, JD

Jane Ann Perry, MA

Kasia Piekarz, MBA

Melissa Renny, MBA

David Letwin, MFA

Mia Charlene White, PhD