

To: State Board of Education

From: Committee on Pulaski County School District Boundaries (Jay Barth, chair;  
Kim Davis, Sam Ledbetter, and Diane Zook)

At its special meeting on 28 January 2015, the State Board of Education (SBE) established a committee “charged with studying the appropriate school district lines within Pulaski County, taking into account communities of interest, student demographics, facilities, and property tax base with a report due back to the State Board no later than the June 2015 regularly scheduled meeting.” This represents that report.

Since January, the committee held a series of five meetings during which it examined demographic and tax data across the county, heard from the superintendents of the four school districts presently operating in the county, and heard public comments from numerous individuals and entities with ties to the communities of interest in the county. (See attached committee meeting minutes.) As a result of this work, the committee has come to understand the complexity of issues surrounding the school district lines within Pulaski County.

At the outset, it should be recognized that the State Board of Education’s powers related to any alteration of the Pulaski County Special School District (PCSSD) boundaries are sharply limited at present by a series of federal court actions dating back to the 1989 federal court settlement agreement. As reiterated by rulings by the federal court in 2003 and 2014, the State Board of Education may not alter the district lines of the PCSSD until that district is declared unitary by the federal court. Indeed, under the 2014 settlement agreement/consent judgment, “[t]he State will oppose the creation of any other school districts from PCSSD’s territory is declared fully unitary and is released from court supervision.” That said, as the PCSSD remains in state control because of fiscal distress, the statutory requirements that “the state board shall consolidate, annex, or reconstitute any school district that fails to remove itself from the classification of a school district in fiscal distress within five (5) consecutive school years of classification of fiscal distress status” (Ark. Code Ann. § 6-20-1908) may come into conflict with these previous agreements if the PCSSD remains in fiscal distress at the end of a five-year period. This report recognizes that federal court orders take precedence over state laws.

The committee strongly believes that the healthiest school districts are those where communities of interest (identified by municipal boundaries, among other factors) are in synchronicity with school district boundaries. That said, it is crucial that any district have the necessary tax base to appropriately serve its student population. Finally, district lines cannot be used to create racially identifiable school districts.

Driven by these principles and based on our study, at the point at which the PCSSD is declared unitary, we believe that the process through which these alterations to districts lines in Pulaski County should be considered by the SBE:

- A) South of the Arkansas River: The division of the city of Little Rock into two different school districts has undermined the health of the LRSD across recent years. Therefore, the LRSD and the city of Little Rock's boundaries should be brought together. However, once the western portion of the city of Little Rock was brought into the LRSD, a limited tax base would exist in the remainder of the PCSSD area south of the Arkansas River. Therefore, it is our sense that a single school district south of the River (perhaps named Little Rock-South Pulaski School District) be created to create cohesion and to enhance efficiency in educational offerings.
  
- B) Saline County Portions of PCSSD: Most of the students living in the municipality of Shannon Hills, in Saline County, attend the Bryant School District, but a handful of students in Shannon Hills live within the PCSSD and attend PCSSD schools. The committee was convinced that in the interest of maintaining community cohesion in Shannon Hills, it makes sense that that portion of Saline County, presently a part of PCSSD, be shifted to the Bryant School District. A second small portion of Saline County to the southwest (See attached map.) is also in PCSSD and, for consistency's sake, we believe that area should also be shifted to the adjoining Bryant School District.
  
- C) North of the Arkansas River: In addition to Jacksonville, three other identifiable communities exist north of the Arkansas River in the county (North Little Rock, Sherwood, and Maumelle). Large chunks of the municipality of North Little Rock are outside of the NLRSD and the value of creating coterminous lines between the city and NLRSD is compelling. In addition, with the Jacksonville-North Pulaski District as a precedent, the cities of Sherwood and Maumelle have established a case for separate school districts including those communities and surrounding areas. When unitary status is achieved for PCSSD, reconfiguration of the boundaries could begin as outlined in Ark. Code Ann. § 6-13-1414. Additionally, provided that a potential new district meets the eligibility criteria outlined in Ark. Code Ann. § 6-13-1501 et. seq., a detachment process could begin with negotiations among North Little Rock, Maumelle, and Sherwood to ascertain the most appropriate division of the portions of PCSSD north of the Arkansas River. In this work, of course, showing full respect for Ark. Code Ann. § 6-13-1414(f) and 6-13-1504 is vital so that racially identifiable district(s) are not created through this process. As the case of Jacksonville-North Pulaski has shown the detachment process is complicated both in design and in implementation, but there is strong

value in the development of four identifiable districts with cities as hubs north of the River.

- D) **Scott Community:** The Scott community, which is not a municipality, straddles the Pulaski and Lonoke County lines. Students in the community are split into separate school districts. Thus, while similar to the Shannon Hills case, it is different because it is not fully within one county. Based on the public comments we received, we believe that a new border should be created with areas south of Upper Steel Bend Road and south of Lower Steel Bend Road moved to the England School District in Lonoke County to maintain that community of interest while also reducing travel time for students. (See attached map.)

Finally, the recently created Jacksonville-North Pulaski School District should be allowed to operate in accordance with the district lines created as a result of the detachment approved by the SBE in 2014.

In addition, particularly if more districts are created in the county, it is clear to the committee that education in Pulaski County could be made more efficient through the utilization of an Education Service Cooperative to provide certain services across the districts of the county and through other inter-district agreements on the provision of services (e.g. transportation).

The committee asks that the SBE accept this report and endorse this approach to school district lines within Pulaski County at the point, if and when the SBE's powers over district lines in Pulaski County are restored.

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Mr. Ledbetter submitted the following statement:

***Supplemental Statement on the Pulaski County Boundary Committee Report***

*Regarding the statement in our report about "healthiest schools" and "communities of interest," it is often suggested that an attribute of successful schools (but not necessarily successful school districts) is having attendance zones that reflect communities of interest. Certainly this seems to foster community involvement in individual schools. However, the suggestion that creating a school district that encompasses the entire geographic area of Pulaski County south of the Arkansas River (except for a portion of Shannon Hills) will result in "communities of interest in synchronicity with school district boundaries" strikes me as being questionable. There are many diverse communities south of the river (e.g. Chenal Valley vs. Wrightsville).*

*Furthermore, dividing the county into four districts north of the river and a single district south of river (resulting in a net gain of one new district) is not compatible with the concept of having 1) more efficiencies in shared services (transportation, food services, building services, technology, etc.); 2) equality in funding (property values will vary widely between wealthy areas like downtown, western suburbs, and shopping malls vs. areas that are depressed -- resulting in winners vs. losers); and 3) diversity among students and faculty. On this point, I am concerned that this proposal has the potential to concentrate kids, particularly those in the district south of the river, into pockets of poverty and further exacerbate segregation along racial lines.*

*We have learned from our experience with the detachment of the Jacksonville/North Pulaski School District that creating new districts from the Pulaski County Special School District (PCSSD) is very complex. Issues relating to division of assets, debt and personnel have been very challenging. The statute that deals with detachment may need to be revised in light of this experience.*

*Finally, we are just a year or two removed from the desegregation litigation, and the PCSSD is still under federal court supervision. There may be value in giving our existing schools and the kids in those schools an opportunity to succeed outside of the interference that litigation has represented. The SBE should consider giving these schools some breathing room and carefully consider any changes that run the risk of returning these schools to the historic patterns that got them into court some 35 years ago.*

*These are my concerns after reflecting on the proposal that we are presenting to the Board today. While I concur in the report and recommendation of the Pulaski County Boundary Committee, I am offering these additional concerns and observations for the record to be considered for any future actions.*

*On June 11, 2015, the State Board of Education approved the above report including the supplemental statement. This document is submitted as the **Pulaski County Boundaries Study Report.***