

October 8, 2014

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

**OPEN LETTER REGARDING THE BREAKDOWN OF EDUCATION LEADERSHIP
IN MINNEAPOLIS**

To: Minnesota Senate Leadership; Brenda Cassilius, Minnesota Department of Education, MPS Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson, MPS Board of Education, Concerned Citizens of Minnesota

We are writing to express our concern with disturbing allegations about our elected, appointed, and self-appointed leadership in Minneapolis. A recent Star Tribune article ["Minneapolis schools seek to end contract with achievement gap group," September 11, 2014] raises troubling questions about the types of practices that go on behind closed doors when it comes to allocating resources and awarding contracts meant to benefit children in our community. According to the Star Tribune article referenced above, "School officials awarded the contract in May, without competitive bid, to CSI, a nonprofit organization run by community activists Al Flowers and Clarence Hightower. They got the contract after strong lobbying by DFL state Sens. Bobby Jo Champion and Jeff Hayden, who serves as deputy majority leader in the Senate. One source said Hayden and Champion threatened to withhold state aid if Minneapolis school officials did not approve the contract." These are matters that relate to ethical breaches of leadership across the board, and as concerned taxpayers, we have a right to know the truth.

Sadly, although concerns regarding the questionable contract between Minneapolis Public Schools and CSI were brought to light initially on 07/30/14 (<http://www.minnpost.com/learning-curve/2014/07/school-boards-approval-375000-contract-al-flowers-related-group-drawing-quest>), the community has still not received satisfactory answers regarding why such a large contract was approved without a public bidding process. We also want to know how CSI became qualified to perform the work, which members of the Minneapolis Public School Board supported the contract (The Star Tribune article only referenced school board member Rebecca Gagnon as a key supporter of CSI), and how many other similar contracts have been approved over the last several years behind closed doors and without a transparent process. It is also unclear how such a large contract could be approved by Minneapolis Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson without the support of her leadership team, which made a recommendation that the contract not be approved by the District. In spite of her team's warning, "[] Johnson did not end the chance for a contract. Instead, the district in February spent \$30,000 to hire a program manager to help CSI create a concrete plan, something that district officials say is extremely rare." The District then went on to pay CSI \$46,000, despite concerns about its lack of satisfactory performance.

It is unconscionable for a District that is barely graduating half of its students to engage in processes that lack transparency and accountability and further erode public trust, all to the detriment of the children who look to Minneapolis Public Schools for an education.

Consider these alarming facts:

- In 2013 only 21% of African American males who qualify for free and reduced price lunch were proficient in math; only 19% were proficient in math; and only 16% in science. Overall, academic results for black males in Minneapolis Public Schools are worse than in other districts and the State of Minnesota;
- Fewer than 35% of black students are “on track for success” as defined by the Minnesota Department of Education;
- In some schools located in North Minneapolis, reading and math proficiency rates for black male students is in the single digits;
- Black boys are disciplined in schools at alarming rates and are routinely criminalized and referred to school resource officers for what are too often minor infractions; and
- African American male students are significantly over-represented amongst those who are placed in special education, labeled as EBD, and isolated in “secure learning environments” within the district.

Results like these demand leadership that is competent, focused, and honest. It is a crying shame that while adults play political games for self-enrichment and to increase their personal influence, Minneapolis students are suffering and their potential is being stifled.

The CSI contract matter clearly warrants a full, independent, third party investigation and an evaluation of the circumstances by which other contracts have been awarded by MPS in previous months and years. The public should also be made aware of the role that each school board member played in lobbying for the CSI contract and approving said contract. Finally, we would like to see a robust evaluation of District policies in awarding contracts and greater levels of transparency and accountability inserted into the process. Thus, we are calling on the Minnesota Department of Education and the Minneapolis Public School Board to take immediate action and to expend the necessary resources for a credible third party to critically examine the concerns that are being addressed and to issue a report to the public of the findings of said investigation.

We also demand a full Senate investigation into the conduct of Senators Bobby Jo Champion and Jeff Hayden, Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson and the Minneapolis Board of Education. We need to know if elected leaders threatened the withholding of funding from the public schools, and if the superintendent gave away nearly \$400,000 to a non-existent program that her staff warned against funding.

As Minnesota taxpayers, we are deeply concerned about the clandestine practices and policies within our public institutions and legislative system that have led to such a travesty of justice. We urge our elected and appointed officials to action and address these concerns in an impartial and just manner for the sake of the students and families who put trust in our institutions to meet their needs.

Sincerely,

Black Advocates for Education

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