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Letter from Shelton J. Cobb, LPSS Board President

It has been a great honor and an extreme pleasure to serve the people of our great parish and city as its public school board president for the past two years. My tenure on the board and as its president has been marked by challenges, frustration and chaos; all of which are indicators of our ever-changing society. But change can be a good thing. I have endorsed a new vision for our school system because of my expectation *that our system should be better, could be better, and must be better*. The future of our community requires that our citizens, today and in the future, be better educated to compete for and to sustain a good quality of life.

In 2011, at the end of our first year as a newly elected board, we began a new journey by selecting a superintendent to lead us. The vote to hire Dr. Cooper was 5–4. In my opinion, the four who voted against were voting for the status quo, while the rest were voting for change and progress. Unfortunately, this narrow margin has led to a great deal of instability and has more often than not resulted in maintaining the status quo. This sad situation suggests to me that some among us do not care about failing schools or making real progress — especially in North Lafayette’s schools. We have made some progress in spite of this lack of support, but my greatest concern is that we will backslide quickly if we continue to violate our own rules, act unprofessionally and engage in backdoor dealing and infighting.

Changes in state law affecting superintendents and school boards have been made at the state level, and yet many are trying to fight them here at the local level. These laws exist to dictate how school systems operate and details responsibilities and duties of both board and its superintendent. Disagreement with these laws is not a justification for violating them. As a board we are required to follow the law. We should not be seeking loopholes or alternative “interpretations” in a vain effort to turn back the clock.

I can no longer be silent on these matters of law, policy and board operations. I am, like many others in our community, frustrated and disappointed with the actions of this boards’ current majority. Rather than acting to uphold and improve the system, they are conspiring to undermine it and its success. And for what? To please their small group of friends and allies with questionable motives? At the expense of what is best for the entire district and all our students? I have consistently voted against this underhanded and destructive behavior, and I will continue to do so. Those who would sacrifice our students and their future to serve their own personal interests should expect to have their conduct revealed to the public. The people of Lafayette deserve to know who these board members are really serving and who is advising them.

For example, the law firm of Grant and Barrow, based in Gretna, has a good track record of removing superintendents. Therefore, any legal advice offered (not solicited) by the firm relating to or suggesting ways to remove the current superintendent must be seen as inherently suspect. Are they looking to profit from the legal fees such a removal would entail? Are they seeking a high-profile test case for

opposition to Act I? How can they possibly offer neutral advice when they have a vested interest in one pre-determined outcome? And what of their ties to current board members through the Louisiana State Board Association? Should an outside law firm be approaching school board members with an offer to assist in “investigating the superintendent?” How can such a firm ever be trusted as the official legal advisor for the entire school system?

Lately, many of our board members have been willing to violate or change our policies in order to get what they want. Not because of the need to better our school district, but rather to remove obstacles to their agenda. The reason we contracted with the firm Forethought was to provide us with recommendations to ensure we complied and remained current with state laws.

There are many obstacles to overcome if we are to be successful as a system. Despite the struggles we’ve faced, I still feel that this is the most opportune time for our system to implement lasting change for the betterment of our students. But for this to happen, we need our supporters to stand up against this corruption and dishonesty and demand that their board members support real change. Our entire community must demand that this board and our school system stand for better education for every child—before it is too late.