

STATEMENT OF DR. NORMA FERNANDEZ

Education is a transformative force that has the power to shape the lives of our students and the future of our community. As the Chief School Administrator/Superintendent of the Jersey City Public Schools (JCPS), I am deeply committed to the success and well-being of our educational system that inspires and prepares scholars to achieve their dreams and ambitions confidently, address future global challenges, and reach their fullest potential in a diverse, ever-changing world. With this commitment, I bring to your attention the alleged violation of multiple regulations by the Board of Education that have endangered the district's operations and the ability to provide services to students, meet our financial responsibility to staff, and prepare a fiscally responsible budget at this time.

Organizational excellence is equally vital to the Jersey City Public Schools. In the spring of 2022, numerous complaints from organizations, vendors, and staff in the business office led the superintendent, with the support of all nine members of the Board of Education, to place the Business Administrator/Regina Robinson, on administrative leave in August of that year. After years of state control, these complaints and allegations endangered the return to local control. Additionally, a dozen employees in the business office wrote to the Board members, sharing their concerns about inefficiency, harassment, and abuse by the Business Administrator. Today, those employees fear retaliation if the Board fails to protect them.

The district's annual and operation audits revealed that the school district's financial resources were not managed effectively and efficiently. This includes overseeing budget planning, expenditure tracking, and financial reporting. Financial transactions were not conducted in accordance with applicable laws, regulations, and policies. The Business Administrator regularly failed to submit the treasurer and secretary reports or certify the funds on a regular basis. The BA's mismanagement forced JCPS to pay millions of dollars in fines and unnecessary expenses. The audits by the two firms found significant deficiencies and material weaknesses in the JCPS financial records. Hence, in my capacity as Superintendent, I presented to the Board on February 22, 2024, twenty-three counts of Tenure Charges for the Board to certify since the BA failed to safeguard the district's financial resources and prevent potential mismanagement or fraud.

By actively monitoring financial matters and holding the business administrator accountable, the superintendent can promote transparency and accountability within the school district. Accountability helps to build public trust and confidence in the district's financial management practices. In summary, as the Superintendent of schools, I play a vital role in monitoring financial matters and holding the business administrator accountable. This ensures effective financial management, promotes transparency, and protects the district's financial resources critical for educating students. Regardless of all the data presented in the Executive

Session and reviewing all the documents before the meeting, the same five Board Trustees that voted to remove the Board President (NI) and Board Vice-President (NV) would not vote to certify the tenure charges. One of the five Trustees went so far as to email the entire board and the administration, saying, *“The only discussion I will have concerning Ms. Robinson is to be reinstated to her position.”*

Within the last two years, the JCPS has reached labor peace with six of the seven unions through fiscally responsible but generous contracts to prevent teachers from leaving to work in more affluent districts without at-risk students and old facilities. Considering the historical conflict between the teachers’ union and the administration, this is quite an accomplishment. We embarked on the most extensive energy-saving plan for a school district in the state, thus earning recognition for sustainability. We have created five mental health clinics in collaboration with RWJ Barnabas Health Care within the comprehensive high schools to meet the needs of our young people, as well as five full-service community schools in some of the more economically challenged neighborhoods. We have implemented Project Resilience districtwide to meet the social-emotional needs of all our younger scholars. We have invested heavily in fixing and repairing roofs, replacing boilers, replacing doors, upgrading security, auditoriums, and gyms.

The actions of the five trustees who orchestrated the coup at the [February 29, 2024](#), meeting do not promote the successful functioning of the Superintendent and the Board as a collaborative and cohesive governance team. The Superintendent and the Board must act as a joint leadership team that reaches a consensus to support student achievement, make community-focused decisions, govern in a dignified and professional manner, respect each other’s rights to disagree and treat everyone with respect, dignity, and civility. These actions are the precursor to providing a thorough and efficient education guaranteed to all citizens by the New Jersey Constitution.

These five Board members failed to approve personnel and facilities projects to create classrooms for unhoused students or allow professional development opportunities through conferences for staff. Failure to pass personnel items, such as hiring new teachers or approving contracts, can lead to staffing shortages. This can result in larger class sizes, increased workload for existing staff, and a decline in the quality of education provided. When personnel items are not passed, it creates a sense of uncertainty and frustration among the employees. Employees expected to receive promotions, salary increases, and additional monies for unused days. Not voting on personnel items can lower morale and negatively impact the work environment, decreasing productivity and a higher turnover rate. Personnel items often involve financial decisions, such as salary adjustments, payouts, and benefits packages. Failure to pass these items can disrupt the employee’s family needs and economic independence. The impact of not passing personnel items can ultimately affect students’ learning experience. Without qualified and motivated staff, the quality of teaching and support services may suffer, leading to declining

academic performance and student outcomes. Hence, I used the authority provided by the Board at the reorganization meeting on January 11, 2024, by resolution 4.13, which states, “*authorizes the Superintendent of Schools to make critical employment decisions, as needed, subject to ratification by the Board at the next subsequent Board meeting*” to hire teachers, paraprofessionals, per diem nurses, and security personnel.

I am deeply committed to the success and well-being of our educational system. With this commitment, I bring to your attention the alleged violations of regulation by five members of the Board of Education that have endangered the district’s operations and the ability to provide services to students, meet our financial responsibility to staff, and prepare a fiscally responsible budget that provides a thorough and efficient education. The [February 29 meeting](#) deteriorated into a dangerous and unsafe event for staff. The budget must now be presented and submitted to the County Executive Superintendent by March 20, 2024, and the administration and four Board members are concerned with safety. Detective DeJon Morris publicly invited rowdy members of the public to come to the next meeting and bring friends. We need immediate action to maintain safety and present our one-billion-dollar budget. The March 18 and March 21st budget and the board meetings are scheduled to be held in person.

Based on the information available, the decision to remove the president was made hastily and, without sufficient evidence or justification, was made for personality issues and revenge since President Ioffe filed ethics charges against the alleged president of the rogue board. Then, the rogue board voted to enter into a contract with the law firm connected to the ethics charges. The circumstances raise concerns about the transparency and fairness of the Board’s decision-making process and may directly violate the purchasing laws for public entities.

I kindly request that the Department of Education provide immediate relief with a fiscal and governance monitor. At the same time, I would also request that the Commissioner refer the conduct of the five members involved for a comprehensive review of the circumstances and a determination regarding whether sanctions, including removal may be warranted as the five individuals have put JCPS on such a dangerous path. It is crucial to ensure that all parties involved have a fair opportunity to present their case and that any decisions are based on solid evidence and just cause as stipulated by code, policy, and regulations. I will also file a complaint against the Business Administrator, Regina Robinson, with the Office of Fiscal Accountability and Compliance. I am committed to ensuring that fiscal trust in my position produces the desired outcome.

Every child deserves access to a high-quality education that empowers them to reach their full potential. In collaboration with our dedicated teachers, staff, parents, and community partners, I am dedicated to fostering an environment where all students thrive academically,

emotionally, and socially. Any decision regarding the leadership of the Board of Education should be made in the best interest of the students, teachers, and the community. Therefore, I urge you to carefully evaluate the situation and take appropriate actions immediately to rectify any potential wrongdoing. The current atmosphere is unsafe, and I fear for the safety of the students, staff, community, and myself.

I certify that the foregoing statements made by me are true. I am aware that if any of the foregoing statements made by me are willfully false, I am subject to punishment.

Norma Fernandez, Ed.D.
Chief School Administrator

Dated: March 6, 2024