

Mary Scott Hunter

Alabama Board of Education - District 8

LIMESTONE • MADISON • JACKSON • DEKALB • ETOWAH

This month marks the one-year anniversary of my election and 10 months since being sworn in. I appreciate the opportunity you have given me to make a difference. In the past ten months, I have honed my personal matrix and process for the decisions I make. I consider practicality and workability. I generally think about whether my decision will better prepare students for jobs. Decisions that can be made locally should be made locally. I give no weight to sacred cows, but I do value experience and wisdom. I ask “Why” a lot. I do not brook nonsense. Being less than polite is beneath me, but addressing issues squarely is usually best. It has been in this vein that I have worked within the Board structure, cast my votes, and taken positions in my individual role.

2011 Roundup

Tenure and Fair Dismissal Reform—During the 2011 legislative session, I supported Tenure and Fair Dismissal Reform. I believe this is a critical piece for student achievement and professionalization of teaching, and I testified in support of this position to a joint session of the Legislature’s Education Committee.

Tornado Recovery — In the wake of the Tornados, I spent time in Madison, Jackson, and DeKalb Counties in my work boots and gloves clearing rubble. I supported increased flexibility for days-in-school for devastated school systems.

Middle Years — This summer, I hosted the District 8 Middle Years Conference at Huntsville’s Space and Rocket Center. Teachers and administrators from across the district came together to address education challenges that are unique to our middle grades. Some wonderful outcomes emerged and are currently being implemented across the district.

Economic Development — I put a team of people together to pull together data from a variety of sources in order to bring to every Chamber of Commerce (and anybody else interested) a presentation on “Workforce Composition and Industry Trends.” The presentations are tailored to the county or region, and I believe it has sparked a statewide move to address this issue deliberately, empirically, and strategically. I have been asked to present to the Alabama Economic Development Partnership on December 9 about this work. A special thanks to my team: Ed Castille, Heather Holiday, Derrick Griffey.

Workforce Development — Middle Skills / Career Technical Skills / Trades / Technical Education...these have become THE hot topic. I was a little slow to this, but my colleague on the Board, Gary Warren, has been a leader among leaders in this work. He began the process of educating me on its importance, and it did not take long to make a convert out of me, especially when I saw in stark relief the need via my workforce development presentations. I supported the Board standing up the Career Tech Task Force which is aimed at making Alabama the number one Career Technical Education State in the nation. I am angling for a funding formula for technical courses and technical colleges in Postsecondary that will incentivize technical education. In the past, our funding formula for technical education in community colleges has been a disincentive to offering it. Technical education is often more expensive than general education. In the past general education and its profit margin has funded technical education. This must change.

Achievement, Achievement, Achievement — At our very first meeting of the Board, I asked about data and driving achievement with data. I was honored to bring a data expert in the field, Dr. Cathy Vasile, to Montgomery to present to the Board the way she led Blossomwood Elementary School to such remarkable achievement levels. I hope to see the culmination of this work in the Assessments Task Force that was stood up by our Board this summer. I believe Alabama will leap frog ahead of other states in years to come with smarter use of home-grown assessments.

State Superintendent Search — The Board said goodbye to Dr. Joe Morton, State Superintendent of Education. During his time as Superintendent, Alabama rose to 25th in the Nation in Education. This is a laudable improvement that must continue. The search for his replacement is on track, and I hope that we will have a new superintendent in place by Christmas. We will interview candidates this Wednesday. Fellow Alabama attorney and JAG and general counsel at the Department of Education, Larry Craven, has distinguished himself as the Interim State Superintendent of Education.

Presidential Endorsement — Three weeks ago, I endorsed Mitt Romney for President. As with any candidate, I do not agree with all his choices. I do appreciate, in particular, his work in education as a Governor of Massachusetts, and Massachusetts is an education pacesetter. I believe he can ultimately win in the general election.

Controversies — The three most controversial issues this year were: the Common Core State Standards, the Calhoun Land Purchase, and the Education piece of the Anti-Illegal Immigration Legislation.

Common Core State Standards — I did not vote for the Common Core, but I do not, at this point, see a need to change what the Board voted to do in November 2010. The Board adopted the Common Core for the use in Alabama Standards of Curriculum in English and Math and voted NOT to adopt the Common Core Assessments in favor of implementing our own. My Military community strongly supports the measure as does our state’s largest economic development prospect, the BRAC. Some GOP leaders in our state have misled the public about the Standards which has resulted in alarming people unnecessarily. I supported the issue being brought back up for debate. That will happen this Thursday. It will be up to opponents and proponents to make their case.

Calhoun Land Purchase — I was disappointed with the vote on the Calhoun Land Purchase. I did not agree with my fellow members of the Board who voted against it. I approached this vote as a pro-business, economic development vote. With that said, I appreciated the collegial debate, and I accept some differences of opinion in this important step. I have always believed that where one door closes, another opens. Perhaps this matter can be taken up again or perhaps this will mean another direction for Calhoun. As for me, I will continue to support the efforts of the community colleges across our state—especially those which are working hard toward dual enrollment with K-12 and those doing quality Career Technical Education.

Immigration — With respect to immigrant children, it is very important to understand exactly what the legislation required. Schools were asked to provide the number of students attending who did not produce documentation—no identifying data was asked for or required. No student would be turned away, but the argument is that it has a chilling effect on school attendance. I tend to believe that the chilling effect comes through the rest of the legislation that simply makes it difficult for a family to live and for parents to work in Alabama. The Legislature’s stated intent with the school measure was to determine the cost of educating the children of illegal immigrants. These are very difficult issues with no good answer in many cases. I believe there is value in understanding the cost of educating the children of illegal immigrants. On the other hand, I think that sending an accurate message to immigrant parents (as Dr. Wardinski did in Huntsville City) makes practical sense. I do not subscribe to the notion that we are heartless for creating an uncomfortable environment for illegals. On the other hand, children should be in school.

What’s in Store in 2012?

Education Trust Fund — We are down, and we must be very, very strategic with the money that is available. K-12 and Community Colleges are vertically aligning their efforts, and I have encouraged them to work together on their budgets. As has always been the case, Alabama (my alma mater) and Auburn and the other four-year colleges will be well positioned in their lobby effort. It will be up to the Legislature to invest our tax dollars wisely with return on investment in mind.

Community Colleges Strategy — Community Colleges will continue to be a great bargain and the first choice for many students seeking higher education. Last year’s higher education portion of the ETF tended to favor four-year colleges over Community Colleges. The funding edge that the four-years received was nevertheless a significant loss to the community colleges who rely more heavily on the State appropriation than the four-years. The argument to change this is purely practical. We need well prepared graduates of both two and four year institutions in our state’s work force, so spreading the investment better is prudent. Just under half of Alabama college students attend a community college, but these colleges do not receive a pro-rata share of the higher education budget.

Math Achievement equals Prosperity — I have just sent a letter to my fellow Board Members, to State Department Budgeters, and Legislative Education Leaders asking that we put ourselves on a course to significantly raise math achievement in our state. Math is the basic building block of all STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math). STEM jobs are going to be the cornerstone of our National, State, and many of our local economies for the foreseeable future. We would be wise to become “Fluent in Numeracy” as Math is the base language of all STEM.

Charter Schools / Charter Concepts — I am an advocate of school choice. However, I am beginning to think that the best way to bring choice to Education in Alabama is through funding flexibility for superintendents and local boards. We could potentially leap frog the Charter Movement and go right into Charter concepts in EVERY school. We already have a head start with Tenure Reform passed last year. Funding flexibility would be the next leap. I tend to think that moving to appoint versus elected superintendents in our State would remove the political challenges and trust issues that are bogging down funding flexibility. With appointed superintendents, districts are not limited to their borders in finding the best leadership.

No Child Left Behind—NCLB has, unfortunately, not achieved its intended purpose in all areas, and it has not been amended to address its deficits. The problem is compounded, in my opinion, by an overly-large and grossly inefficient Federal Department of Education. The Board has started the process of reviewing assessments and testing as it relates to NCLB and student achievement. In the past, the emphasis has been on high stakes testing to satisfy the reporting requirements of NCLB. It is my hope that assessments in Alabama Public Schools will move back to their proper role of helping teachers and students understand what a student has learned. I hope that our Board will be in a position to seek a waiver from NCLB next year with a new assessments plan.

Merit Pay — There are many ways to include merit pay in our system. Pay for performance is just one way to implement it. The primary problem I see with performance pay is that Alabama does not yet have sufficient education growth modeling (where a student begins and where they end a school year knowledge-wise) with archived achievement data. In a few years, we should have the data we need for it. Meanwhile, I recommend merit pay, if used, be for an incentive to attract and maintain teachers in STEM curriculum—where we have high need.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve. It has been a good first year, and I look forward to 2012.

MARY SCOTT HUNTER

Representative-Alabama Board of Education

District 8 (Limestone, Madison, Jackson, DeKalb, Etowah)

P.O. Box 18572, Huntsville, AL 35804 • 1-888-531-1312

On Facebook and Twitter

Alabama Department of Education – Kindergarten through 12th grade

Alabama Community College System