



December 14, 2020

Dear Ellington Community,

At the end of this month, I will be stepping down from the Board of Directors of Duke Ellington. I have served on the board since 2004, and have had the honor of holding the position as president since 2007. While this has been a labor of love, it is time for me to step aside and allow others to serve.

During my time on the board, I have had the privilege of working with strong Ellington leadership, starting with co-founder and “force of nature” Peggy Cooper Cafritz, and continuing with a variety of Heads of School. This has included Mitzi Yates, Rory Pullens, Father John Payne, Desepe DeVargas, Tia Harris, and currently Sandi Logan. While each had different skills and strengths, they all shared a love of the school and a desire to see it excel. I have long realized, however, that the key to Ellington’s success is the hard work and commitment of its faculty. These individuals take the raw talent of incoming Ellington students and help to shape and mold them into artists/scholars/citizens and – importantly – graduating seniors.

During my service, there have been challenges along the way. In the early days prior to renovation of the school, we struggled to find contractors and others who would donate their services and funds to do the patchwork carpeting and painting the old facility desperately needed. During the years of renovation, the school struggled mightily – and successfully – to keep its program at a high level while operating from two neighborhood schools separated by several blocks in the Shaw area that, to put it mildly, were ill suited to Ellington’s needs. Most recently, there was the travesty of the unfounded charges of the Office of the State Superintendent of Education regarding out of state admissions that was only overcome by a concerted effort of parents, Ellington officials and supporters.

Of course, there were great successes. I recall the thrill of assisting in the design of a school of the highest quality, and seeing it built and being put to great use. There were wonderful fundraisers supported by renowned performers, many of whom worked right alongside of our own talented students. There were contributions made by Dave Chappelle and many other talented alumni who keep giving back to Ellington. And above all else, there was the pride of witnessing students matriculate through a demanding schedule, graduate and go on to higher achievement. This includes my own nephew, Jonathan McCrory, who was a Duke Ellington student when I first joined the board and who is now the Artistic Director of the National Black Theater in New York City.

My biggest disappointment, of course, has been the inability to secure appropriate funding from DCPS for Ellington’s hardworking faculty and staff. In 2017 – 2018, Peggy, Ellington Fund President Ari Fitzgerald and I spent many, many hours negotiating, prodding, and cajoling DCPS and other District officials to secure a commitment to a new funding model for

the school. We came close to an agreement, only to have it derailed at the last minute by the OSSE fiasco. The good news, however, is that there are bright and capable members of the DESAP board, parents and school staff who are focused on strategically planning to secure just compensation for Ellington. In the meantime, Sandi Logan and her team continue to bring a strong sense of professionalism and energy to the leadership of the school that will keep Ellington on an upward path.

While I am leaving the board, the institution that employs me – George Washington University – remains committed to its partnership with Duke Ellington. The President and the Provost of the university, both of whom visited the school last spring, have appointed a new GW representative to the DESAP board: Aristide Collins, the President's Chief of Staff and Secretary to the university. Aristide joins long serving GW representative Gregory Squires and, when the position of Director of the GW Corcoran School of Arts & Design is filled, the plan is for that person to become GW's third representative to the board.

What do I take with me when I leave? I take wonderful memories, memories that have not been dimmed by a pandemic which, while it may leave a lasting impact on education, is a challenge that I am confident that we – collectively – will overcome. These memories include the enchantment of seeing museum quality displays of art throughout the school. The delight of hearing musicians, individual voices and instruments as well as large ensembles, filling the school's performance spaces. The absolute joy of seeing talented dancers displaying both exuberance and discipline. And finally, the unforgettable feeling when an Ellington show begins, sitting in expectation when the theater lights dim, knowing you are about to experience something truly special.

Thank you, Duke Ellington School of the Arts.

Sincerely,

Charles Barber, Esq.