

## HLOC February 12, 2019

Mr. Chair, honorable members of this South Carolina House of Representatives Legislative Oversight Subcommittee, staff, and other distinguished guests, as Vice Chair of the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School Board of Trustees, I offer you greetings on behalf of the Board, from Charleston to Spartanburg, Chester to Georgetown, and those of us in Columbia. It is a distinct honor and privilege to serve you and the citizens of the State of South Carolina. Thank you for the trust you have placed in each of us. It is not without serious contemplation and commitment that it is accepted.

And why? For me, I believe that every child deserves a future filled with opportunities and possibilities. Every child deserves a future filled with hope.

Each school year, Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School has the opportunity to instill that very hope in the more than 400 at-risk youth who enroll in one of its three 14-week programs. These young men and women receive the discipline, structure, and education that will prepare them well for the future of their choosing. This is the platform of hope.

Since 2014, the percentage of students completing the program who also earned a GED increased from 53% to 72%. Since 2015, 67% have entered the workforce, 22% have enrolled in post-secondary education, and 11% have enlisted in the military. Where would each of these be today were it not for Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School?

In its 98 years, Wil Lou Gray has served more than 32,500 students. I believe that Dr. Wil Lou Gray would be proud of her school today. Her motto resounds strong: "Why Stop Learning?"

You, the members of this Subcommittee, alongside your fellow members of the South Carolina General Assembly, make all of this possible. You undergird this hope. The General Funds you appropriate comprise 84 percent of the school's budget.

Through partnership with the Office of the Governor, the South Carolina House of Representatives, the South Carolina Senate, the Board of Trustees, and especially the faculty, staff, and administration of Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School, we are able to provide students with futures they might not otherwise have had. Thank you for the foundation you have built for these students.

I assure you, though, that it has required dedication, perseverance, and wisdom to navigate these pathways to ensure the success of these students. From the Board of Trustee's decision in December 2007 to separate from the National Guard Youth Challenge Academy to the development of the Opportunity School's highly successful 14-week programs, I have witnessed the careful consideration with which your Board of Trustees has acted.

We now meet four times a year to evaluate the progress of the school, with interim reports from the Director. Our 5<sup>th</sup> meeting is actually a Legislative Luncheon. You elected each of us to this Board. You need a dedicated time to provide feedback on our performance. Whether one of the two Board members with tenures of 5 terms or more, or the 10 of us with less – including the 5 members in their 1<sup>st</sup> term – the Board of Directors requires feedback.

And the feedback offered by the General Assembly matters. In August of last year, the Board of Trustees participated in Board Training, not a previous requirement of its members, but based on a *recommendation* from the Office of Senate Oversight. In November of last year, the Board ratified changes to its policies based on *observations* from the Office of Senate Oversight. The Board has gone so far as to deploy simple technologies to ensure that participation is not obstructed by time, distance, or commitments.

Because the Board of Directors sets the strategic direction of the Opportunity School, from which the faculty, staff, and administration then manage the daily operation, we must be involved, engaged, and informed. In 2018, Board attendance averaged 10 out of 12 members.

When the next 14-week class begins on February 25, 2019, potentially 140, 16-19 year-old men and women will step upon the grounds of that 87-acre campus and begin a new future and contribute to 9 consecutive years of over 100 GEDs earned. A new future... filled with opportunities and possibilities.

In closing... I take you to June 8, 2018. The scene was aflutter with excitement. Cars were parking. People were gathering. The cadets smiled in accomplishment. The families smiled in pride. What a day! Graduation Day! Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School Graduation Day! The auditorium filled. The minutes passed. The students processed. Sgt. Major Miller provided words of encouragement, words of success. The occasion arose. A young man approached the stage, ready to receive his award. As the accolade was given, the results were undeniable... 5 years. "Wait, did I hear that correctly? Five years?" He smiled. The audience applauded. Five years. This young man standing before us had achieved a 5-year improvement in grade equivalency. More than three times the average. I thought to myself, "Five years. Yeah, that's why I'm here." Think of that potential that could have gone unrecognized. Think of that potential that could have been lost. All it needed... was an opportunity.

Mr. Chair, honorable members of this South Carolina House of Representatives Legislative Oversight Subcommittee, staff, and other distinguished guests, thank you for allowing me this time to speak as a proud member of the Wil Lou Gray Opportunity School Board of Trustees.