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**A Common Goal  
Amid LR controversy, optimism**

By: Gary W. Ritter and Sarah C. McKenzie

The news of a leadership change in the Little Rock School District--from Baker Kurrus to Michael Poore--sparked controversy this week. In the face of the understandable negative reaction from many in the community to the unexpected change, we want to share a few of the reasons that we remain optimistic about the potential benefits of this move for students and families in Little Rock.

First of all, Michael Poore is a lifetime educator who's been in the field since 1984. Last year, the choice of Kurrus as superintendent raised criticism because he had no professional background in education. In fact, his hiring required a waiver from the state Board of Education. Kurrus' expertise was in finance and management, and it is undeniable that he worked doggedly to address the organizational and fiscal issues faced by the district. Poore has the background to lead the academic improvement needed in Little Rock public schools.

Second, Poore is a respected school leader with experience in a variety of school settings. Currently the superintendent of Bentonville Public Schools, Poore has served as a leader in several districts (large and small) in Colorado and Arkansas for more than a decade. Notably, he served as superintendent in Sheridan, Colo., with a student population that was 74 percent minority and 76 percent free/reduced-lunch eligible, and led the Sheridan district off the state's academic "watch list."

Although not from Little Rock, Poore has learned the Arkansas context through his leadership of the fourth-largest district in the state over the past half-decade. Yes, Little Rock is unique; but all school districts come with their own set of challenges, and it seems Poore's experiences have prepared him to meet this challenge.

Third, the leadership change does not appear to be the result of a Waltonite conspiracy to dismantle the Little Rock School District. Voiced by many over social media, this idea seems to stem from the fact that Poore currently works in Bentonville, home to Wal-Mart and the Walton family.

On Tuesday night, journalist John Brummett tweeted that "I don't actually think Poore of Bentonville is a Walton disciple. His politics may be a bit ... uh, left?" After further investigation, Brummett wrote on Thursday that "And I also am advised reliably that the Waltons were as surprised by the Kurrus ouster as anyone."

So, if it's not a Walton conspiracy, then why did Commissioner Johnny Key make the change? At his press conference, Commissioner Key thanked Baker Kurrus for his strong management of the schools. While systemic organizational change is an important starting point, Key believes that Little Rock students and teachers may now benefit from a leader with a stronger academic background. This surely seems reasonable.

As for Poore, he says he is taking on this job because he wants to accept the challenge of turning around a struggling district and improving the lives of thousands of students. Given our past experience with Superintendent Poore, we'll take him at his word.

While we believe that Superintendent Poore has the right mindset and experience to tackle the very challenging job of managing a large urban district, we understand the criticism voiced by many local (and vocal) leaders in Little Rock regarding the process. The communication about the change certainly could have been better, and one of Poore's first challenges will be to engage the community and continue to develop strong relationships the way that Kurrus has done.

And this leads us to the fourth reason to be optimistic about the future of Little Rock schools. The recent controversy has reinforced what many of us already knew--many talented, energetic, and passionate people care deeply about the students in Little Rock. Vocal critics of the leadership change, like Sen. Joyce Elliott, care about Little Rock students. Commissioner Key is willing to face substantial criticism to make the changes he thinks are best for students. Poore cares enough to leave his relatively comfortable post in Bentonville for, by all accounts, a much tougher job, because he wants to make a difference for the students in Little Rock.

This controversy reminds us of an important fact: Various stakeholders, despite having different ideas and proposed strategies, all share a common goal--to improve the educational experience for students and families in Little Rock. We would all do well to keep this in mind.

From our post in Northwest Arkansas, we have been fortunate enough to observe Superintendent Poore closely. As a leader, he engages the broader community, considers competing views, and, most importantly, critically examines district practices in search of ways to improve the schooling experience for his students.

In our view, any district would benefit from Poore's leadership, and we can't help but feel optimistic that he will soon be working for the 20,000+ students in our state's capital.



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## Opinion Editorial

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