

# Powerful State Commission Seeks Answers From School Leaders On Low-Performing Schools Compliance

*By Adam Pridemore for NCASA*

The Superintendent and School Board Chair of Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools were called before the powerful Joint Legislative Governmental Operations Commission this week as the Commission met to discuss various high-profile issues around the state. The Commission, chaired by Speaker of the House Tim Moore (R-Cleveland) and President Pro Tem of the Senate Phil Berger (R-Rockingham), were looking for answers from the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools leaders regarding the school district's compliance with the legislature's recent law changes regarding low-performing schools and the providing of employee retirement benefits for employees on long-term leave from the school district.

Superintendent Dr. Beverly Emory and Board Chair Dana Caudill Jones were first questioned by Sen. Chad Barefoot (R-Wake) concerning the district's policy of granting employees educational leave time. The issue was primarily focused on the district allowing NCAE President Rodney Ellis to be on educational leave time, and thus receiving time and contributions into the state retirement system while working for NCAE. The legislature has attempted to prohibit this type of arrangement by including in the enacted state budget law a provision forbidding the purchase of service when a member of the Teachers' and State Employees' Retirement System performs services for certain organizations, including NCAE.

During the meeting it was pointed out that the district's policy allows for employees to be on educational leave for one to two years depending on the circumstances, but that Mr. Ellis had been on education leave for several years, during which time he was accruing time in the state retirement system. Dr. Emory and Ms. Jones both acknowledged the practice pre-dated their roles in the district and that perhaps a review of the policy was in order.

Dr. Emory and Ms. Jones next answered questions from Sen. Berger regarding recent resolutions by the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools Board of Education pushing back against the new standards for identifying "low-performing schools" as reflected in this year's state budget law. That provision now identifies "low-performing schools" as any that receive a D or F performance score even if the school met growth. Sen. Berger asked Dr. Emory and Ms. Jones if the district intended to comply with the law, to which both responded they felt the district was in current compliance. At specific issue was the requirement that a school system take action against any principal that has been in a low-performing school for more than two years. Dr. Emory and Ms. Jones pointed out that the district could not comply with that provision of the law, which requires the action by September 30, when the performance grades were not released until October 1, preventing the district from knowing which principals would fall under the law. They also took the opportunity to point out that they felt the law was arbitrary and capricious, noting that it could take even the highest-performing principals more than two years to turn around a low-performing school, and the law as written could force the districts to dismiss these high-performing school leaders before they have even had a chance to begin making progress at the school they have just recently signed on to lead.

To read more about this meeting, an article by the Winston-Salem Journal can be found [here](#).

A video of the meeting showing the full exchange between legislators and Dr. Emory and Ms. Jones can be found on WRAL-TV's website [here](#).