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## **First State Educate Welcomes New Executive Director, Julia Keleher**

The boards of directors of First State Educate and First State Action Fund are thrilled to announce Julia Keleher as their new executive director. Keleher succeeds founder Laurisa Schutt.

A Philadelphia native, Keleher brings almost two decades of proven experience to the position. She has held various education leadership roles, including secretary of education in Puerto Rico from 2017-2019, seven years leading technical assistance and risk management initiatives at the U.S. Department of Education, and as educator and administrator in the Red Clay Consolidated School District from 2000 to 2007. Including other degrees and certifications, Keleher has a B.A. in political science and M.S. in education from the University of Pennsylvania, and a Doctor of Education Leadership from the University of Delaware.

Her role in Puerto Rico attracted controversy. After leading Hurricane Maria recovery efforts and passing an education reform bill, Keleher became the target of a federal investigation and was sentenced to six months in federal prison and twelve months of home confinement on conspiracy charges.

“Julia’s experiences these past fifteen years have led to a deep understanding of the power structures and intricacies of educational systems,” said First State Educate Board President Thère du Pont. “The education and justice systems around our families are complex and unforgiving – Julia is uniquely positioned to spark significant change.”

“We conducted a national search and considered more than two dozen outstanding candidates. Julia’s combination of experience, well of compassion and empathy, and commitment to educational excellence is unmatched. We could not be more excited for her to work with our partners to build a cohesive and inclusive ecosystem that drives continued improvement in Delaware schools,” says du Pont.

Shortly after her release, Keleher became a Smart Justice Ambassador with the ACLU of Delaware, advocating for legislative changes to reduce the prison population and address racial disparities within the justice system. “There can be painful consequences to challenging powerful systems,” Keleher said. “I have seen first-hand the crushing consequences low-performing public schools can have on communities. I am emerging from my recent experience wholly moved to improve systems that affect educators and families.”

Keleher’s professional career has been characterized by innovation and creative problem solving. “My roles in Red Clay, the Department of Education, and in Puerto Rico showed me how pivotal coalitions are in efforts to transform learning,” Keleher said. “As executive director of First State Educate, my focus will be elevating and integrating the voices of those most affected by our school system – and those best positioned to influence change.”

“Julia has a wonderful way of zeroing in on a problem and creating a positive workable solution. She is completely focused on how to help children succeed,” said Nancy Smith, veteran educator and Mentoring Coordinator with Red Clay Consolidated School District.

Keleher plans to schedule meetings throughout the fall to hear what policymakers, educators, students, and families see as key issues in their education communities.

Schutt will continue to support the organization in an advisory position.

*First State Educate/Action Fund (FSE/AF) were founded in 2019 to catalyze radical change in education by activating the power of Delawareans. In the four years since its founding, FSE/AF has helped 16 game-changing leaders be elected to school boards throughout the state, including five school board members enrolling 45,000 students who now serve in leadership positions. FSE/AF also helped propel numerous initiatives to change the conditions of teaching and learning, including the Wilmington Learning Collaborative, RISE UP Delaware and FaCE coalitions.*



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