

Kelvin Orduna
New Haven, CT

January 27, 2026

Michael Moore, Vice President for Academic Affairs
University of Arkansas System
2404 North University Ave
Little Rock, AR 72207

Dear Michael Moore,

Last month, I watched a meeting of the Arkansas Legislative Council that left me deeply unsettled. Representative Vaught questioned administrators of the Arkansas School for Mathematics, Sciences, and the Arts about alleged celebrations on campus following the death of Charlie Kirk, asking why such activity was being allowed.¹ The question did not point to any specific incident, but it was framed broadly and ominously enough to draw the attention of other legislators in the room. In response, Executive Director Corey Alderdice clarified that no reports of celebrations had been brought to senior leadership. Vaught's aggressive questioning and the subsequent withholding of appropriated funds exhibited how legislative scrutiny can threaten ASMSA in the absence of firm leadership. In a state where the Ten Commandments hang in public school and university classrooms, ASMSA has remained a space where students are trusted to think freely. To be clear: Vaught's question was not about responding to an incident but restricting a student's expression. As ASMSA searches for its next Executive Director, the importance of leadership able to navigate political pressure cannot be overstated.

In conversation with other alumni, one commonality is clear among us all: ASMS(A) has always encouraged students to think for themselves. Throughout my time at ASMSA, I recall instructors emphasizing that their job was to teach us how to think, not what to think. Whatever prompted the legislator's concern was almost certainly not an organized, institutionally sanctioned event. It was far more likely a private joke or a moment of adolescent provocation confined to a dorm room. Regardless of the facts, Vaught's remarks leave ASMSA vulnerable to targeted oversight by asserting the allegation to the public as truth. Still, classroom conversations taught me to collaborate and to consider different perspectives. However, it was in conversations at the RLO, in landings, and dorm rooms where I felt the most intellectually stimulated. ASMSA does an exceptional job at bringing together a diverse group of students from across the state of Arkansas. It does an even better job of providing a space for these students to challenge each other's perspectives and reconsider their own beliefs. Coming to Yale after ASMSA, I have often thought about how difficult that transition could have been for me, coming from rural Huntsville, Arkansas. Without prior immersion in an intellectually diverse environment, it would be far more challenging to engage in meaningful conversation with classmates from across the world.

ASMSA exists in a uniquely difficult position. It is at once a public high school and an institution of higher education within the University of Arkansas System. In theory, this governance allows the school to draw from both K-12 and higher-education frameworks. In practice, it exposes the school to conflicting demands, subject to K-12 regulations governing curriculum and student conduct while simultaneously being expected to operate with the independence of a college campus. As a result, ASMSA is fragile and falls into a gray area of legislative oversight, where it is neither fully understood nor consistently accounted for in funding and policy decisions. Alderdice leveraged this ambiguity,

¹ Arkansas Legislative Council. "Performance Evaluation & Expenditure Review." Arkansas State Legislature, 18 Nov 2025, sg001-harmony.sliq.net/00284/Harmony/en/PowerBrowser/PowerBrowserV2/2025-11-18/-1/31252. Accessed 11 Dec 2025.

strategically emphasizing ASMSA's higher-education identity to preserve campus culture. Over time, ASMSA's leadership has repeatedly been drawn into broader culture-war battles. Seemingly ordinary aspects of residential life are recast as political controversies and brought under scrutiny—even by University System leaders. Navigating this tension between students' rights and public accountability requires both procedural knowledge of state legislation and a deep commitment to the values of ASMSA.

ASMSA has also been challenged by outside organizations. In 2019 the Arkansas Citizens for America Agenda explicitly accused ASMSA of promoting “liberal ideas” and questioned why the taxpayer-funded school was hosting Hillary Clinton.² ASMSA's culture of intellectual freedom, the core to its program, is routinely framed as ideological bias by those who disagree with it. When external groups attack ASMSA for inviting speakers or allowing diverse thought, they are asking the school to abandon its most foundational value: a trust of students to engage thoughtfully with ideas. Even faculty face the same pressures to turn down opportunities when they know their decision may draw scrutiny. Alderdice, a marketing and public-relations expert, nevertheless understood ASMSA's role and protected its intellectual culture by refusing to appease outside groups and moved forward with Hillary's appearance at the commencement ceremony. A pattern has emerged where a student's personal expression, a visiting speaker, and perhaps later, an intellectual discussion, gets weaponized into a legislative concern, and ASMSA's leadership must defend the kind of institution ASMSA is meant to be.

Alderdice had thirteen years to perfect a strategy standing between students and state scrutiny and protecting institutional autonomy while remaining accountable to the state. He knew how to do this. The next director will face the same pressures, the same accusations, the same legislative calls to Little Rock. My concern is whether they will have the same clarity about what is worth defending. The role cannot be filled by someone who views state mandates as the primary guiding force of the institution. The next director must be willing to advocate for ASMSA even when doing so is uncomfortable, politically inconvenient, or misunderstood to afford the intellectual freedoms that alumni recall. Of course, ASMSA cannot exist entirely outside the legislature, nor should it. However, there is a difference between operating within a system and allowing that system to hollow out what makes the institution distinctive or invoking ASMSA's dual identity in defense of the institution.

As you help guide the search for the next Executive Director, I hope that ASMSA's legacy is not treated as incidental, but as essential. The decisions made in this search will determine whether ASMSA continues to fulfill its founding mission to “educate gifted and talented math and science students of the State” with the independence necessary to do so well. ASMSA gave me and so many others a rare experience of intellectual freedom in a state that has shown how quickly educational spaces can become sites of political theater. ASMSA has avoided that fate so far.

Sincerely,

Kelvin Orduna ('25)

cc. ASMSA Advisory Executive Director Search Committee

² “opening [sic] statements on indoctrination of kids at AR math & science.” YouTube, uploaded by keeparkansaslegal, 8 May 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPNNoO-rcGc0. Accessed 11 Dec 2025.