

March 25, 2018

Dear Fellow East Siders:

Last week's non-storm provided a welcome vacation day for many students, a logistical hassle for parents and a relief for everyone else. This week's letter will discuss public education, from both a national and local perspective.

This past Friday, I attended the Student Equity Symposium at Bryant University, where I heard two interesting panel discussions. The first, moderated by Superintendent Maher, featured Dr. David Driscoll, who served as Massachusetts Commissioner of Education during the passage and initial implementation of the Education Reform Act of 1993, often called the Massachusetts Miracle. Spurred on by an anticipated Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruling establishing a constitutional right to education, the Massachusetts Legislature and Governor Weld approved a "grand bargain" that combined generous State resources and strict accountability standards that, within a few years, vaulted the Bay State to the top rankings in all categories under the National Assessment of Educational Progress, where it has remained ever since. While there were many bumps in the road, and while challenges remain, Massachusetts achieved its success due to a state government leadership that agreed to make an adequate investment in its urban school districts beyond the level of political expedience. Once they were promised adequate resources, educators committed to high standards which appeared very ambitious at the time, but ultimately were met. The second speaker, Michael Rebell, described his experience bringing an educational equity lawsuit in New York State that yielded a partial victory in the form of billions of additional State aid for New York City and other urban school districts. Both described how the establishment of a constitutional right helped state officials move beyond the lack of political clout that traditionally limited the State's response to the needs of children in poverty, and the poorer communities in which they reside. Prior to the court cases, those two state governments limited their response to inadequate half-measures, such as Rhode Island's failure to build into its funding formula a factor for the needs of children learning the English language. This hurts the Providence Public Schools, whose students speak 54 native languages. Dr. Driscoll also explained how the statistical phenomenon known as Simpson's Paradox applies to test scores. Even though student performance in different categories (Hispanics, African-Americans and Whites) all are increasing nationally, the aggregate scores have remained flat over time because the test pool now includes a greater number of Hispanics and African-Americans and fewer Whites. The paradox will dissolve when the "achievement gap" between the various groups shrinks, and Rhode Island's recent listing as having the worst Latino-White achievement gap is a source of shame and alarm, but with that said, the changing relative sub-populations has masked much overall progress that has occurred in recent years.

Friday's symposium provided useful context for the School Department's presentation, at Tuesday night's Oversight Committee hearing, of its [5-year budget](#), [5-year program summary](#) and [5-year strategic plan](#). More specifically, Rhode Island enacted a new state aid formula in 2010 that provided for seven years of increases which, while helpful, did not provide adequate State funding in the way that Massachusetts did in 1993. While the infusion of State funds allowed Providence and other urban districts to keep their heads above water, they did not support advances, and the increases are due to end this year. In the meantime, federal aid has declined from \$30 million to \$20 million since 2012, while the City's appropriation has been limited by the aftermath of the 2011 "category 5 fiscal hurricane," increasing this year by \$3.5 million for the first time in the past seven years. Because the baseline School Department budget is anticipated to increase by approximately 1.5% annually, the net result is a projected cumulative deficit of \$37 million. Needless to say, this financial instability compromises the School Department's ability to maintain any program at all, never mind one that supports initiatives to spur greater progress.

These financial stresses limit the School Department's ability to approve new contracts with substantial cost increases. Last month, the Providence Teachers Union disrupted the Mayor's State of the City address to present to the City Council their dissatisfaction with the status of contract negotiations. While these negotiations are handled by the administration, the teacher protest spurred the School Department Oversight Committee to ask the Internal Auditor to research where Providence stood relative to nine peer districts. The Auditor's [Report](#) indicates that, measured by salary alone, Providence sits in the middle of the pack of ten, but that when one accounts for certain post-retirement benefits (such as payments for unused sick days, pre-65 health care and post-65 Medicare supplemental coverage), Providence moves up to third place out of ten, within \$420 of the highest paid community, and more than \$2,400 greater than the average of the other nine. The report also reveals that the Providence teacher's retirement benefits are worth \$2,457 per year, versus a median value of \$707 among the other nine communities. Thus, if the teachers agreed to a median set of post-retirement benefits, the average teacher could see a salary increase of almost 2.5% without increasing the cost of the contract. Alternatively, Providence teachers could agree to work an extra two days per year (183) to bring them up to the average of the peer communities, which would provide a major opportunity for professional development that Providence

currently cannot obtain with its State-low 181-day work year. (The Internal Auditor's report also calculated that the average Providence teacher receives total annual compensation of \$76,090, exclusive of benefits, and 208 teachers earn more than \$90,000 annually.) The value of the education these teachers provide far exceeds what they are paid; however, given the School Department's difficult financial position, Providence cannot afford to pay its teachers far in excess of what other Rhode Island school districts currently pay. For these reasons, I am hopeful the Internal Auditor's report will help the negotiating parties find a way to accommodate both the teachers' goal of increasing salaries with the administration's goal of avoiding (or minimizing) any increase the overall cost of the contract.

Sincerely,



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