

SAM ZURIER

May 15, 2011

Dear Fellow East Siders:

Last week, the Providence School Board completed its 2½ month review of the Mayor's plan to achieve financial savings by closing four schools and reconfiguring a fifth one. Each school received a separate vote, and the School Board members took different positions based upon their understanding of the merits of each alternative. All members agreed that while these measures were unfortunate and difficult, the alternatives to voting to close these schools would have brought even greater harm to a greater number of the children of the City of Providence. Some members of the affected communities questioned the legitimacy of the School Board. Some of my City Council colleagues introduced resolutions seeking the immediate resignation of the current School Board, and the replacement of the current Mayoral appointment process with elections.

Last week, the School Board adopted a teacher recall plan which calls for the rescission of dismissal notices for approximately 1,350 of the 1,920 teachers who received them and the dismissal of two categories of teachers. The first is a category called "R's in pool" which consists of classroom teachers who were laid off, brought back to teach as substitutes, and who were not successful in gaining a classroom position through interviews. These teachers currently received, in many cases, top step pay for substitute teaching work. The second category consists of teachers whose misconduct provides a documented basis for dismissal. The recall plan calls for the remaining teachers to interview for the existing open seats. The number of open seats is less than the number of eligible teachers, but the recall plan excludes outside teachers from consideration for these positions. The plan calls for teachers and principals to rank order their preferences, and for a matching process similar to medical school internships.

Upon presentation of this plan, the School Department filed a declaratory judgment action seeking a ruling as to whether Rhode Island law permits the recall in light of the City's financial difficulties and the State's requirements that teacher placement decisions be based primarily on the needs of students, rather than seniority alone. The Providence Teachers Union filed a countersuit in Federal court seeking a ruling that the teachers' right to retain permanent positions is a higher priority than either the City's financial difficulties or the education reform mandates of the Rhode Island Department of Education. If the parties cannot resolve these issues by agreement, the lawsuits will have a significant impact on the quality of education that Providence children receive. In contrast to previous years, there are not additional funds available to pay for the continued employment of teachers beyond those who are strictly necessary to operate our schools; therefore, funding these positions will come at the expense of essential components of our public education program.

We value our public school teachers, many of whom transform children's lives every day. The school closure plan will no doubt have an impact on the education that some of our children receive, not to mention the employment of some teachers who were performing good work. As painful as this scenario is, however, the alternatives are even worse; therefore, the School Board found it necessary to adopt this plan. I know most of the members of the School Board, and I commend them for making these decisions which were not popular, but in their sincere and considered judgment were in the best available alternative to advance the education of the children in Providence as a whole. It is for these reasons that I wrote a letter to each School Board member thanking them for their honorable service, and I am hopeful that someday in the future more of us will appreciate the important work they performed for us in these difficult times.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Samuel D. Junier". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "S".