



May 27, 2018

Dear Fellow East Siders:

While you enjoy this Memorial Day weekend's start of the unofficial summer season, I encourage you to take a moment to reflect on the holiday and its origins in the Civil War. In addition to inflicting the greatest number of casualties in our country's history, that war was a major turning point in our identity as a nation committed to the value of human dignity. We have come a long way since then, and still have very far to go, but we fought the Civil War for the principle that our nation's identity is based upon shared ideals and principles, not on racial identity. This week's letter discusses the School Department budget.

Last Thursday, the School Department Oversight Committee completed its review of the School Department budget, approving it and recommending it for passage by the entire City Council. The budget continues previous strategic goals of student achievement, building capacity and engaging parents and community. Funding constraints limit the range of new initiatives, but new positions have been created to extend emotional support to students whose lives outside the classroom are stressful, affecting their attendance and their readiness to learn. Also, the School Department will work in coordination with the Police Department to enhance the security of schools and classrooms in the face of the tragedies happening at schools elsewhere in the country.

The School Department budget is funded from four principal sources – State aid, municipal aid, federal aid and private grants. The City Council reviews the “local budget,” which consists of the first two of these sources, and which total \$384 million for the coming year, an increase of \$2 million from the current year. The increase is exclusively from State funds under the 2010 funding formula, an increase of approximately 0.5%. As a result of budgeted increases for transportation, utilities, medical expense and charter school transfers, the School Department needed to find greater efficiencies to maintain its program, this year by reducing the size of the central office. With that said, there may be some room for new initiatives if, as anticipated, the State increases its aid by based on documented enrollment increases (an expected \$2 million boost). If and when these funds are approved, the School Department will present a supplemental budget for review and approval by the City Council.

While the School Department describes this year's budget as adequate (though not generous), it projects major challenges over the next five years. The City has increased its school appropriation only once (by 2.5%) over the past eight years, and State aid increases under the 2010 funding formula are due to end this coming year. In light of this, the School Board President has requested that the Superintendent prepare a five-year budget based on the current projections of available funds, including as necessary a description of the actions the School Department will take to balance its budget during these anticipated lean years.

The 2018-19 budget includes an increase in teacher compensation due to “step increases” (for greater seniority), but not salary increases. The last Providence Teachers Union contract expired in August, 2017, and the teachers are seeking a salary increase in the next contract. With that in mind, the Committee reviewed certain line items that could yield funds for those salary increases without increasing the amount of the budget. The Committee was guided by a [Report](#) the Internal Auditor prepared comparing benefits offered Providence teachers against those offered by peer communities in such areas as severance payments for unused sick days, Medigap coverage and length of work year. Next year's budget commits several million dollars to the first two items, which are not typical features of other communities' contracts. Also, the professional development budget line of \$827,000 could be largely saved if teachers worked a 183-day year (which is the Statewide norm) rather than the current 181 days, although the School Department indicated that if it had the two extra work days, it would increase professional development rather than save the money. In short, the Internal Auditor's Report and the 2018-19 budget identify resources to fund salary increases for teachers that do not require increased appropriations. With that said, if the administration and Providence Teachers Union reach an agreement that requires a supplemental budget, the City Council will review it and determine whether the added investment is sufficiently justified.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Samuel D. Zurier'.