

SAM
ZURIER

September 10, 2011

Dear Fellow East Siders:

In the coming week, the City Council will begin to review the tentative agreement reached between the Mayor and the Providence Teachers Union. In previous years, the Council's review focused on financial issues, because the School Board approval process allowed them to vet the document's educational policy issues. This year, the City Council will not have the benefit of the School Board's review due to legislation enacted by the General Assembly. The Council does not have the expertise to review educational policy issues embedded in the contract, but the new legal landscape may require us to consider them to some extent nonetheless.

One major feature of the tentative agreement that impacts both finances and educational policy is the new contract's "no layoff" clause. In my letter to the Ward last week, I described how that "no layoff" clause could be costly for the School Department if a proposed new charter school attracted several hundred Providence children out of the public school district. In the past few weeks, the School Department's handling of the "forced placement" issue demonstrates how the same clause's financial imperatives may change the way the School Department assigns teachers to classrooms, as I will now explain.

Over the past few years, the State has required Providence to fill vacant classrooms through a "criterion-based hiring" process under which principals interview teachers and rank them based on the children's needs, while teachers decide which classroom assignments are most desirable to them. The lists of the principals and teachers are then matched in an algorithm to maximize the mutual preferences.

This year, the District operated its criterion-based hiring process early in the summer until the Mayor's office determined that it was likely that the proposed new contract would contain a "no layoff" clause. Teachers who are not assigned to classrooms can serve as substitutes, but they can be considerably more expensive (up to \$100,000 total annual cost including retirement, benefits, etc.) than regular substitute teachers. As a result, the Mayor's office directed the School Department at some point in July or August to limit classroom assignments to current Providence Teachers Union members, even if principals did not give them a high rating in the "criterion based hiring" process. Through these "forced placements," some teachers who had been offered employment in Providence were told they could not work here after all. Parents in the affected schools petitioned the School Department to set aside the placements and follow the policy, but the School Board instead voted to ratify the forced placements after the fact, to the consternation of the parents.

While I do not know enough about merits of the School Board's decision, it is clear that the School Department was trying to do the best it can in light of the difficult financial imperatives that the District's tight budget faced when making the commitment, as part of the current proposed contract, not to lay off any teachers. As my own study of the proposed contract has only begun, it is clear from both last week's charter school debate, as well as the recent "forced placement" issue, that the proposed contract's "no layoff" clause, if approved, will continue to require difficult tradeoffs between education quality and financial cost (which also affects education quality) as long as that clause remains in effect.

Sincerely,

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