

# Samuel D. Zurier: Neighborhood schools are succeeding

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In his Dec. 17 Commentary piece (“Garner’s death highlights our empathy gap”), Michael Magee, the CEO of Rhode Island Mayoral Academies, views the aftermath of Eric Garner’s death as an example of an “empathy gap” that divides the country. His piece, in its first nine paragraphs, notes the harms of our “nation profoundly segregated by race and class.”

Had it ended there, the discussion would have covered familiar ground, but in its tenth and final paragraph, the piece makes an unfounded and damaging argument. This argument blames the “empathy gap” on “highly restrictive neighborhood schools in gerrymandered enrollment zones” which “need to be opened to a broad cross-section of children that reflect the diversity of entire states.”

To the contrary, we need to strengthen our neighborhood schools in Providence and Rhode Island today, for both social and educational reasons.

While public school segregation policies were the scourge of Little Rock in 1957, we face different challenges in Rhode Island today. After the piece appeared, I wrote to Mr. Magee, asking him to identify which neighborhood schools in Rhode Island today were causing the “empathy gap” he identified. He did not reply, but a member of his board, Angus Davis, stated on Facebook that “the Providence school department policy of reserving 80 percent of the slots” at the Vartan Gregorian or Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. elementary schools “for kids whose parents can afford to live within a short distance to those schools is discriminatory.”

His example is instructive. Vartan Gregorian may be the most diverse elementary school in Rhode Island in terms of demographics (21 percent African-American, 28 percent Hispanic, 9 percent Asian and other, 42 percent white), socioeconomic status (56 percent free/reduced lunch) and special education (20 percent). Gregorian achieves this diversity through the Providence Public Schools’ neighborhood assignment plan that allocates 80 percent of the school’s seats to families residing in the school’s neighborhood.

Instead of being “highly restrictive” or “discriminatory,” this neighborhood school builds an “empathy bridge,” bringing a broad range of children together to receive a quality public education, in a Title I Distinguished School rated as “leading” by the Rhode Island Department of Education.

Rather than treating successful neighborhood schools as a problem to cure, we should support the Providence public schools’ efforts to build a network of strong neighborhood schools throughout the entire city, such as at Veazie Street Elementary School, which made great strides under Susan Chin, the state’s 2012 Elementary School Principal of the Year.

Providence’s neighborhood schools do not segregate the “have nots” from the “have yachts.” Instead, our problem is that too many families opt out of the public school system altogether. During the 1970s and 1980s, many middle class families left the capital city for the suburbs. Today, this migration continues for some Providence families, while in certain neighborhoods (including Gregorian’s), the majority of children attend private rather than public school. In contrast, both in Providence as a whole and in the rest of the state, more than 87 percent of children attend public schools.

In 2002, the Providence School Board commissioned Professor Darrell West to survey parents of children in Providence’s private schools, asking them what programs could encourage their return to the public school system. The majority of parents surveyed chose advanced academic instruction as the single program most likely to encourage them to enroll their children in the Providence public schools.

As we build a successful network of neighborhood public schools, city-wide or cross-district magnet or charter schools can play a useful supporting role. But Mr. Magee’s vision of a vast network of schools that “reflect the diversity of entire states” to displace neighborhood schools is unrealistic and harmful. Busing children every day from South Providence to South Kingstown would waste time, money and fuel, clog the roads, pollute the air, accelerate global warming and tear apart our neighborhoods’ social fabric.

In Central Falls, charter schools and the public school district entered into a historic compact to work together. In Providence, the School Department extends a hand of good will to Achievement First Mayoral Academy by including that school on its parental choice form. Achievement First can return the favor by forming a partnership with one or more Providence public elementary schools in the neighborhood, such as the Carnevale Elementary School, a two-minute drive away from Achievement First.

Working together with the Providence public schools can be much more useful than criticizing neighborhood schools that are succeeding both academically and socially.

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