

COUNCILMAN
SAMUEL D. ZURIER
55 DORRANCE STREET, SUITE 400
PROVIDENCE, RI 02903
EMAIL: sdz@om-rilaw.com
Office: (401) 861-2900 ext. 105



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City of Providence, Rhode Island

April 11, 2014

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Susan Lusi, Ph.D.
Superintendent, Providence Public Schools
797 Westminster Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Superintendent Lusi:

Two weeks ago, I attended a meeting of the Vartan Gregorian PTO at which the Mayor, the School Board President and you answered questions from parents. During that discussion, I learned about a planned change in the classroom configuration at the school for next year, namely the transfer of three pre-K classrooms to another location (I believe Asa Messer). A number of parents have expressed their concerns about this issue, and asked me to make my own inquiry. Through this process, a series of uncoordinated, and to some extent redundant information requests were forwarded to the School Department, including in some cases excessively strident commentary. I appreciate the graciousness, patience and responsiveness you and your staff have shown in addressing all of these requests.

The starting point for this discussion is a consensus that the current program at Gregorian is the most popular one in the District (even for families who live at the other end of the City), and the School Department holds it in high regard. As a result, there is no educational reason to change the current pre-kindergarten program, and instead the decision to move it is based on considerations of the convenience of the students and budgetary impacts.

The new configuration would consolidate the District's inventory of pre-kindergarten programs at four schools (Carnevale, Charles Fortes, Pleasant View and Asa Messer). As indicated on the enclosed maps, this would concentrate the District's entire pre-kindergarten program (26 classrooms) in the south and west of the City, in zip codes 02907 and 02909. The District also provided data concerning the zip code of pre-kindergarten students, indicating that Gregorian has twelve from zip codes 02903 and 02906 (five in special education, and seven in regular education) and 13 from zip codes 02904 and 02905. There also are 17 additional pre-K children at other schools from 02904 and 31 additional pre-K children at other schools from 02905. As a result, PTO members have asked whether it makes sense to retain at least two single pre-kindergarten classes at Gregorian next year.

Superintendent Susan Lusi
April 11, 2014
Page Two

When we discussed this alternative on Tuesday, the School Department officials informed me that the District's pre-kindergarten program is characterized by "clusters" of classes together at the same school, rather than single pre-K classes at multiple schools. I was informed this practice achieves certain efficiencies and pedagogical benefits. While there may be a justification for this general approach, I write to ask you to reconsider given the specific circumstances that obtain here, namely the available resources at Gregorian and the geographical concentration of pre-kindergarten programs that the contemplated change would generate.

With regard to Gregorian's available resources, it is my understanding that some Gregorian parents met with School Department officials on Wednesday to discuss the staffing needs that Gregorian would have in order to retain a single pre-kindergarten special education class. They tell me that most of the necessary staff already is present at the school to service its K-5 special education students, and the only specialist who would have to travel to the school would be the one responsible for formulating and reviewing IEP's, a task performed only once or twice a year. As a result, these parents believe the additional cost of locating two pre-K classes at Gregorian rather than as part of a "cluster" is not significant, and may be to some extent offset by the cost savings of having the two classes of children attend the school in their neighborhood.

With regard to geographical concentration, Asa Messer is relatively near the three other existing programs, within around 1½ miles of Fortes and Spaziano. In contrast, the proposed change would leave all the pre-K programs far from the East Side. The closest pre-K program to the ML King School (Messer) and the Gregorian school (Fortes) would be 2½ miles away. Other East Side neighborhoods would be 4 miles away from the nearest pre-K program.

As part of the discussion of the opportunities available to the Gregorian community if the pre-K program is discontinued, we discussed the possibility of expanding the K-5 population by introducing additional "bubble" classes, in which a cohort of students is admitted as a third kindergarten class, and then retained as it moves through successive grades. While I initially thought this extra class would be embraced by the Gregorian community, I learned the opposite is the case, because it is not possible to maintain a continuous faculty at the school for these students, as the "bubble" class requires a different teacher each year as it advances from one grade to the next. The parents believe this has a detrimental effect on teacher quality, as it has provided a setting for "forced placements" in which teachers who are not selected for permanent classroom assignments are placed in these positions. The Gregorian parents inform me they believe that the current neighborhood school policy will allow all (or almost all) neighborhood children to attend Gregorian even if the school has only two kindergarten classes instead of three, provided that the policy is implemented scrupulously, transparently and fairly.

There also is the issue of capacity. The school's enrollment has increased from less than 400 to more than 450 in recent years, and the proposed changes would increase that number further, all without an assistant principal. The school's common facilities and staffing already are strained from the increases, and those strains would worsen.

Superintendent Susan Lusi
April 11, 2014
Page Three

I also learned of the parents' desire to have input in helping the school to thrive. More specifically, the parents would like to participate in Gregorian's School Improvement Team, but that body has not met for several months while the school has moved forward with a new body called the Instructional Leadership Team, which does not include membership from the community of parents. The parents have the impression that this new body has effectively displaced the SIT, and they no longer have any "seat at the table" to discuss ways to improve the school. As you know, the School Board enacted policy KB to establish SIT's to create a structure for parental involvement, consistent with the District's core belief and commitment to "[w]elcome and engage families and community as valued partners and advocates for education." The District's policies in this area are reaffirmed by Title I, which requires parental engagement plans at every school. Had Gregorian's SIT met during the past several months, it could have provided a communication channel to facilitate discussion of this and other issues. In addition to providing parents with their right to engagement, such an interactive process may have reduced some of the negative tone and static from some upset parents that have detracted from the discussion in recent weeks.

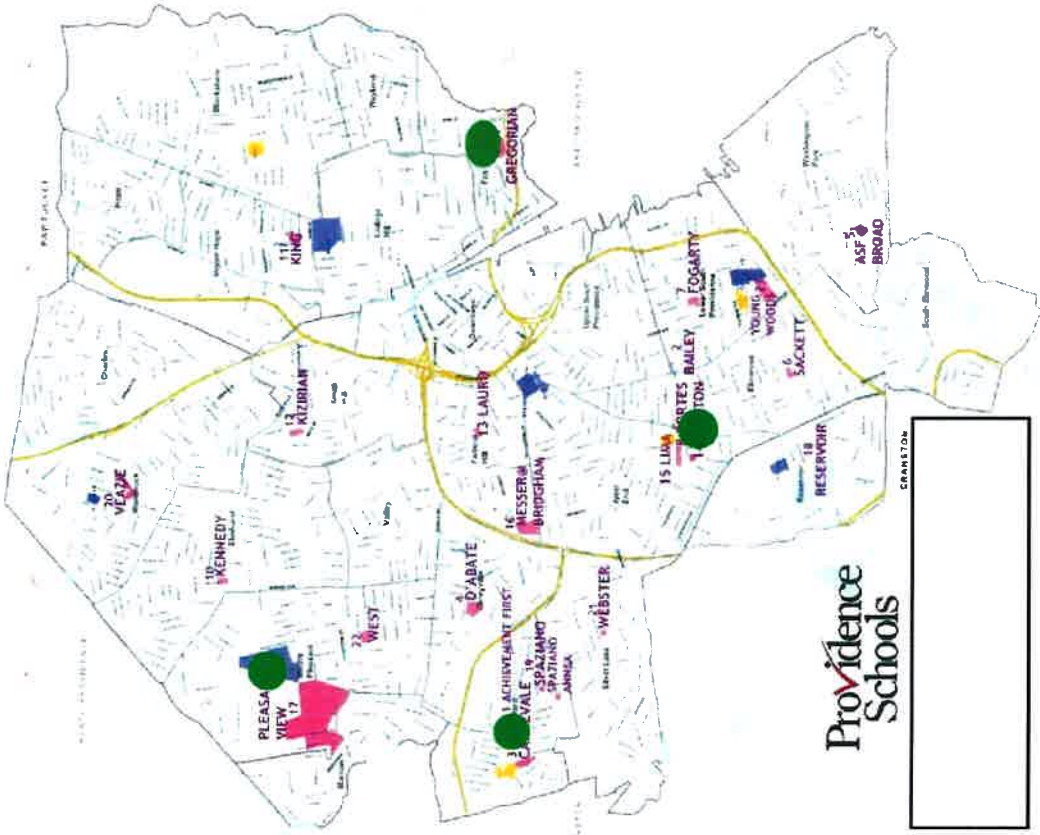
While I appreciate and respect your commitment to act in the best interest of all of the children of Providence, I ask you please to reconsider the planned changes at Gregorian in light of the facts I have just described. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

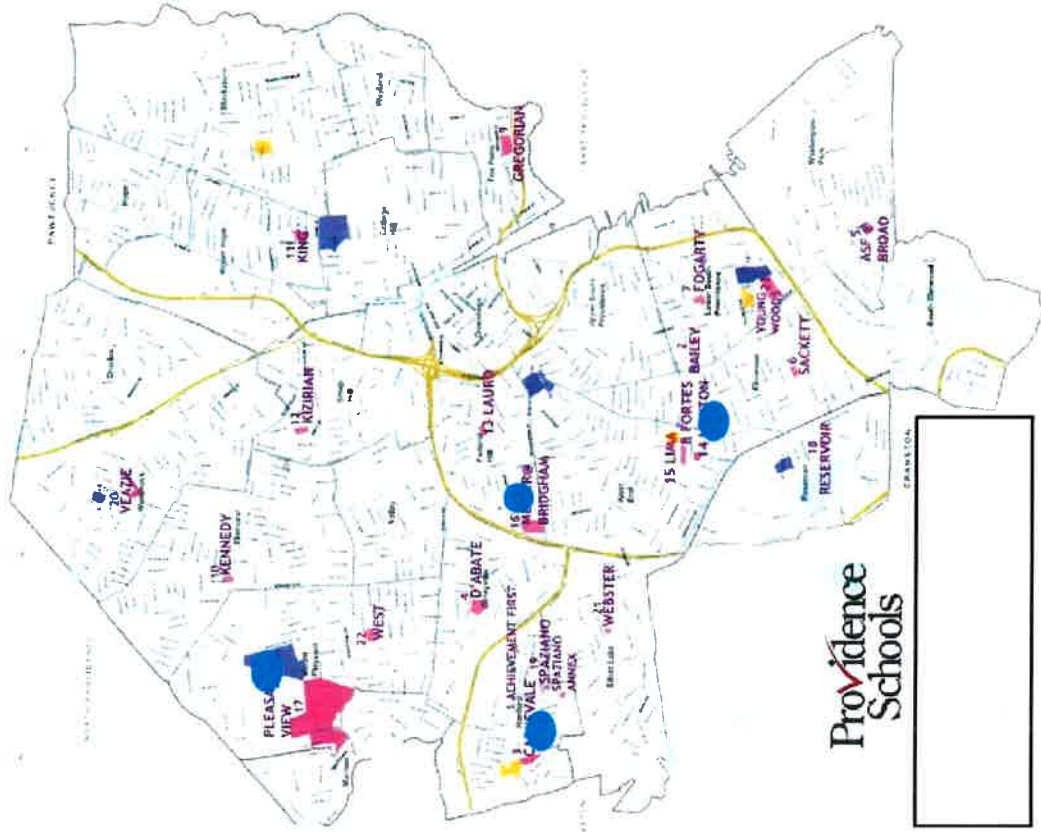
A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Susan Lusi", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Enclosures (School location map and zip code map)

Cc (w/enc.): Providence School Board (via email)



● Current Locations



● Proposed Locations

Neighborhood Boundaries

with Zip Codes

Providence, RI

