

Introduction

The City Council Education Subcommittee conducted a hearing on April 3 to review the application of the Grace School Mayoral Academy. Also on April 3, the Education Subcommittee received a report from the Internal Auditor concerning the projected financial impact of the proposed school. On April 4, the Subcommittee heard a presentation from representatives of the Providence School Department special education programs currently offered in the Providence Public Schools.

This Report contains four sections. The first two sections will review the presentations made by the Grace School Academy and the Providence School Department. The third section will describe the Internal Auditor's projection of the new school's fiscal impact. The final section will contain conclusions and tentative recommendations.

1. **The Grace School Academy Proposal**

The Meeting Street School currently operates a "full inclusion" pilot school on its campus called the Grace School with children enrolled in grades K-5. This pilot program combines special education and general education children in a single classroom with a special education specialist and a general education teacher. This program provides the concept on which the Grade School Academy would be based.

The proposed school would teach children in grades K-8 in a "full inclusion" format, in which three special education students enrolled at the Meeting Street School would join a class with 17 charter school students.¹ Each class will be co-taught by a special education specialist

¹ In the school's early years, the class size and composition would vary; however, the program would develop towards this class size over time.

and a general education teacher. There would be two classes per grade. When completely enrolled, the school would include 306 charter school students, and a student/teacher ratio of 10:1. The students would be drawn from Providence and North Providence. If students from the two districts enrolled in proportion to their current populations, around 88% of the children would come from Providence, and 12% from North Providence.²

The Meeting Street School was established in 1946 to serve children with special needs. It serves nearly 3,000 children each year with such services as speech therapy, occupational therapy, Early Intervention, Early Head Start and outpatient services. The school has a strong board of trustees, loyal donor base and significant good will in the community.

The Grace School Academy aims to fill a niche by educating children with disabilities in a charter school setting. The school's leaders believe that its format also will offer advantages to the charter school general education students. First, the school will provide individualized education plans for every student, and the low student/teacher ratio will encourage customized instruction, as the special education teacher can pass along insights to the general education teachers about learning styles of all of the students. The school will provide teachers and students with the gift of time, with a class day from 8:15 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and additional programs available after school and during the summer. Also, the school's leaders believe its inclusive model will provide all students with a unique opportunity for character development. In their experience, all children in these classrooms gain an increased acceptance and appreciation of diversity, better communication and social skills, greater development of moral

² Grace School Academy is working with the Rhode Island Department of Education to develop a lottery process that complies with State law and past practice for other mayoral academy charter schools.

and ethical principles, a greater number of friendships and increased self-esteem.

At the hearing, the Subcommittee presented a series of questions about middle school instruction. The State requires middle school teachers to gain certification in specific academic subjects (reading, math, science and social studies) as well as a general education certificate for children at this level. Teachers learn to hone their craft in each of these disciplines, in order to ensure that the curriculum conforms to the State's Common Core Standards. Students, in turn, have different learning styles and relative strengths from subject to subject. As a result, it is common in larger middle schools for teachers to concentrate on teaching a single subject, refining their technique and skills over time through experience and professional development. In schools that follow best practices, children in a given grade (or a cluster within a grade) are assigned the same "team" of teachers for their major subjects. Teachers then can hold team meetings and compare observations about a particular student's learning style, strengths and weaknesses across the different subject matter areas.

At the Grace School Academy, the presenters plan for each middle school teacher to have certification in two subject matter areas. In this way, the two sixth grade teachers, for example, can teach four subjects to the two sixth grade classes. Each teacher will be able to compare more directly each student's relative learning style and subject matter ability in the two subjects she or he teaches, while the two teachers can confer to compare each student across the four disciplines they teach in total.

Another area of questions was concerning children learning the English language. The Department of Education has regulations requiring additional training for teachers of these children, as well as protocols concerning parental involvement and notification, as well as

program design. The Grace School Academy anticipates hiring specialists to address the needs of students learning the English language as the needs of enrolled students require.

The Education Subcommittee hopes that the School Department and the School Board will review and evaluate the ability of the Grace School Academy to address the specialized needs of middle school students, students learning the English language, and the students who fall within both of these groups at the same time. At this point in time, Meeting Street School does not have experience operating a full-inclusion middle school program. Having teachers provide instruction in two different subjects brings the advantage of continuity, but finding these specially qualified teachers may be more difficult. Also, the dual subject teachers will have a greater burden in having to master two different subject matter curriculums, and to refine and develop their instruction to align properly with State standards, which themselves may evolve over time.

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In short, the Grace School Academy brings many advantages for general education students as well as special education students. The Meeting Street School's existing program provides a valuable base of knowledge and experience about how such a program can work in a traditional elementary school classroom setting, where traditionally a single teacher covers all subjects with the class over the course of the school day. In short, the Subcommittee sees a more extensive foundation for the proposed school's elementary program than its middle school program. With that said, there are other K-8 schools of similar size, and the record of the current Grace School at Meeting Street School is strong.

2. Special Education Programs at the Providence School Department

Pursuant to the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),

the Providence School Department has the responsibility to provide a free appropriate public education to all students with disabilities, and to do so in the least restrictive environment. The School Department develops individual education plans (IEP's) for each student to accomplish this requirement. Currently, around 17% of the District's enrollment (or more than 3,000) students receive special education services.

The needs of the District's special education students are varied and diverse, ranging from physical disabilities to cognitive or emotional ones (or combinations of these). Also, the needs of the District's special education students vary widely in terms of scope and/or severity. This range in turn produces an equally broad range of indicated responses consistent with the goal of integrating the experience of special education into the schools' general education program to the greatest degree possible. Some students can have their needs addressed adequately through a few "pull out" sessions each week with a specialist, or a visit by the specialist to the classroom. Some schools offer "full inclusion" classes which, similar to the Grace Academy model, include both a general education teacher and a special education aide or teacher who co-teach a class containing both general education and special education students. Other students have needs that exceed the opportunities available in an inclusive classroom. For them, the District offers some "sheltered" programs within a school or, in the case of particularly serious needs, the opportunity to receive an education at an outside program that specializes in the services that a particular student needs.

The inclusive classrooms benefit special education students by providing a stronger academic program, higher expectations and greater behavioral progress. The general education students gain the benefit of a smaller student to teacher ratio, better academic performance

(especially in mathematics), increased social education about the needs of others and stronger collaboration skills. Currently, four elementary schools have a full inclusion program in some classrooms, while other schools have programs in which the special education teacher spends part of the day co-teaching in two, three or four classrooms. Unfortunately, these benefits come at the cost of requiring more resources per classroom; therefore, the budget's constraints prevent the School Department from expanding what is a successful program.

As described at the public information session, the School Department must work very hard to assess the needs of its students and match them to appropriate programs. The task becomes more complicated as the task extends to thousands of students with a diverse range of needs. With that said, however, this complexity creates a large amount of flexibility. In the middle and high schools, where students take separate classes in each subject, it is possible to create individualized programs that may account for a student's relative needs or abilities subject by subject and class by class. As of today, all of the secondary schools in Providence offer some level of special education programming.

The School Department's broad spectrum of children's needs and school configurations permits other forms of diversification and differentiation. There can be some classes that are "full inclusion" classes and others that have visits by aides or "pull out" sessions for groups of children with similar needs. Administrators and teachers arrange school assignments and schedules within a school to adapt to any particular student's conditions to develop a program that uses different combinations of resources to offer the most effective education in the least restrictive environment. With such a broad base of students, needs and programs, the School Department has a larger tool kit to address special education students learning the English

language as well.

At the April 23 meeting, the School Board reviewed a report prepared by the Council of the Great City Schools concerning the School Department's special education services. While noting the program's many positive and impressive accomplishments, the report contained a list of recommended enhancements and improvements necessary to provide programs that would best serve the needs of our children. Among other things, the Report recommended extensive curriculum development, technology upgrades and increased staffing to allow for more "full inclusion" classrooms. All of these enhancements require a substantial investment of additional resources which, regretfully, are not currently available.

3. Financial Impact

The Internal Auditor prepared a five-year projection of the Grade School Academy's financial impact, assuming the school opened with 128 lottery students in the 2013/14 school year, expanding to 240 students in the 2017/18 school year. He further assumed that 88% of the students would come from Providence (with the remaining 12% from North Providence). A copy of the projection is attached as Exhibit A. By the fifth year, the Internal Auditor projects that the Grace School Academy will result in a net loss of \$2.6 million in local, state and federal revenue, even after accounting for anticipated savings from reduction in teaching positions due to the reduced enrollment. The Internal Auditor also noted that the combined fiscal impact of the two mayoral academy charter schools (Achievement First and Grace School Academy) would reach \$12 million in the 2017/18 school year.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The City Council looks to the School Department and the School Board for expertise on

education matters in the City. It is the Subcommittee's hope that these bodies will undertake their own review of the Grace Academy proposal. If and when these other groups review the proposal, they may reach different conclusions that may be worthy of greater weight than the ones that follow due to the expertise of educators.

Accepting those limitations, the hearings revealed some obvious strengths for the Grace School Academy program. The Meeting Street School has a well-earned reputation for serving children with disabilities. The pilot program currently in place at the Meeting Street School provides a base of experience and encouraging results to date. The proposed program brings in additional resources in the form of small classes and additional programs after school. The concept of a charter school built around a special education program is novel and potentially valuable.

With that said, the strengths of the Grace Academy program are more apparent at the elementary school level than the middle school level. As noted at the hearing, middle school education involves several additional program components, including teachers with separate subject matter certifications, teaching teams, classes organized into learning periods and the like. The current pilot program, which ends in the fifth grade, has not dealt with any of these issues. While the presenters expressed a willingness to add additional specialists to the school to deal with additional needs, the complexities could multiply such as, for example if different children in different grades are learning English while speaking different native languages at home. The Grace School Academy's proposal to employ teachers with dual certifications will increase continuity in the classroom, but involves a cost due to the teacher's limit on available time to develop expertise in each of two subject matter areas. More generally, the small scale of the

Grace Academy provides a clear advantage in the elementary grades, but the picture becomes less clear in the middle school grades.

It is not possible for this Report to provide a learned evaluations of the efficacy of the Providence School Department's overall special education program; however, it was clear from the hearing that it has been designed thoughtfully, and is operated by caring professionals who show great dedication and commitment. It is possible to say, however, that the large scale of the School Department's program provides more "in house" options for the varied needs of special education children at both the elementary and secondary level. The School Department has the range of tools to "mix and match" as appropriate, adapting to each student's special education and/or other needs (such as learning the English language from different native tongues), in classrooms that are taught by teachers who specialize in a single subject area.

In an ideal world, Providence would benefit from having both the Grace School Academy program and the special education services currently provided by the District. In that way parents would have more choices, and the two programs could share best practices to allow both to grow together. If RIDE approves the Grace School Academy application, many of these benefits will follow.

If the State accelerates the school funding formula and provides the full \$19.7 million anticipated in the School Department's budget, it may be possible to gain the benefit of both the Grace School Academy and a greater investment in our own special education programs. If we do not see a significant increase this year, however, the "money follows the child" feature of the State aid formula will provide the benefits to the children attending the Grace Academy by charging a severe price to the children attending the Providence Public Schools. More

specifically, the mayoral academy will, in five years, cost the School Department \$3 million in resources above and beyond any savings it can realize from being relieved of the responsibility of educating the Providence children who attend the Grace School Academy.³ This loss of revenue will affect the quality of education received by the remaining students in the Providence Public Schools, be they in general education or special education.

While the City Council does not have any formal role in approving or reviewing the Grace School Academy application, there does appear to be an alternative that could allow Providence students to enjoy most of the advantages of the proposal while mitigating the costs to the School Department. More specifically, it may be worth considering whether the Grace School Academy should operate as an elementary school, rather than a K-8 school. If it selected this alternative, it could build on the successes of the existing pilot program and the simple structure of the one teacher-one classroom aide that is simple to implement in an elementary school classroom, but leads to complexity when adapting to a middle school program.

Conversely, the Providence School Department's multi-layered multi-school range of options for middle and high school students might be better suited for this group. Finally, such an alternative would reduce the school's size from nine grades (K-8) to six (K-5), which would reduce by one-third the financial impact of the proposed school on the finances of the School Department.

It is unfortunate that the current funding formula creates this inherent tension between the

³ It should be noted that the \$3 million cost is calculated after accounting for \$872,000 in savings from a reduction in teaching positions. We do not know if the Providence Teachers Union would oppose those reductions, citing the "no layoff" clause in the current contract.

values of choice and the financial well-being of the Providence Public Schools. There is, however, an alternative that the Subcommittee urges the Mayor, the School Board and the School Department to consider. Other school districts, such as Boston, have created choice through “in-district” autonomous schools that provide the benefit of charter-school type choice without the financial impacts imposed by mayoral academies. For example, Boston has a group of 21 “pilot schools” that

are part of the school district but have autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum/assessment, and the school calendar to provide increased flexibility to organize schools and staffing to meet the needs of students and families.

See Boston School Department website. Boston developed this program by negotiating it into its contract with the Boston Teachers Union. In previous contracts, the Providence Teachers Union had agreed to a limited program of partially autonomous “site based management” schools that had some, but not all of the features of Boston’s pilot school program. The effort was limited, however, by a lack of enthusiasm. The recent development and growth of mayoral academy charter schools which could, if expanded, have an impact on the Providence Teachers Union membership, may provide the right conditions for both sides to embrace the advantages of in-district charter schools that provide choice to parents and students without depriving the other children within the Providence Public Schools of scarce resources.