



January 28, 2018

Dear Fellow East Siders:

With the Super Bowl looming, I hope you have a chance to enjoy the fresh air outdoors. (If you do not know the location of the storm drains nearest your house, now is the perfect time to identify them and ask the City to clean them out if necessary.) This week's letter discusses some of the issues facing our public schools in the coming year.

Last Thursday, the School Department Oversight Committee held its organizational meeting. Tomorrow night, the Committee will begin to interview the Mayor's nominees for the School Board, concluding those interviews the following week. This is a pressing matter, because the terms of three Board members expired on December 31, and the vacancies make it hard for the School Board to perform its work in the interim. For this reason, the Committee will balance its responsibility to perform its due diligence with the need to accommodate the School Board's schedule.

The Committee likely will complete its review of these nominations the following week, at which time it will begin to develop a work plan for the coming weeks and months. I expect that work plan to include three major areas, namely the School Department budget, pending collective bargaining agreements and improvements to school facilities.

As Providence Public Schools students, educators and parents know, our schools are not lavish operations; instead, the School Department is faced with difficult choices each year. The budget contains a number of fixed costs (such as State pension, charter school transfers and utilities) that rise every year. On the revenue side, State aid increased substantially during the past six years, but is now due to reach a plateau under the State's funding formula. The State aid increases have allowed the Department to deal with a flat City contribution for most of that time, and dramatically falling federal aid. The Governor's budget does not contain the same increases in State aid we saw in previous years; therefore, next year will be substantially more challenging than the previous five or six. The School Department and School Board are currently working on its budget internally prior to a presentation of its final budget to the City Council in May. Before that happens, the Committee will invite them in to review the current and long-term issues presented by the budget.

Before the current school year began, the collective bargaining agreement between the School Department and the Providence Teachers Union expired. As a result, the parties are continuing under the terms of the recently expired agreement. In some districts, the continuation of work without a contract can generate ill will, but fortunately there have been no public indications of such a problem in Providence. With that said, the renewal of a contract involves much more than a review of teacher salaries and benefits. The Providence contract (which is more than 50 pages in length) contains numerous work rules and other provisions that affect the delivery of education in the classroom, and the three-year contract cycle provides the best (and in some cases the only) opportunity to review possible changes to those rules for the benefit of educators and students. For example, the City Council's Education Committee prepared a 2011 [Report](#) that noted that the length of the school day in Providence (as specified in the contract) was shorter than almost any other Rhode Island school district, which finding supported a change in the contract that year that extended the school day. It is my hope that the parties are negotiating a contract that benefits the students while being fair to teachers and to taxpayers, and the Committee will have the opportunity to review the next tentative agreement when it is ready.

As part of her budget, the Governor announced her support for a major school facilities initiative supported by a request to State voters to approve \$500 million in dedicated bond funding to address a Statewide need that is estimated at approximately \$2 billion. In conjunction with that effort, the School Department and Mayor's office have begun a public engagement and planning program to develop a facilities plan for the Providence Public Schools. The City Council's Bond Study Commission issued a report in May, 2015 in which it estimated the deferred maintenance backlog of the City's school facilities at between \$300 and \$400 million, which amount would support continuation of the current program, while more would be need to upgrade and modernize those facilities. In other words, the State's bond, if approved, will provide a substantial boost to Providence and other school districts, but there still will be a need to make hard choices with scarce resources.

Sincerely,

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