



February 18, 2018

Dear Fellow East Siders:

I hope your refrigerators are stocked with milk and your cupboards with bread as Winter returns this weekend. This week's letter discusses the work plan for the School Department Oversight Committee over the next month.

This past Wednesday brought sadness to the Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida when a mentally disturbed former student murdered 17 students and teachers. Pictures of grieving parents included a mother with an Ash Wednesday mark on her forehead, only adding to the unreality and tragedy of a devastating scene. The discussion which followed included the traditional debate about gun policy, whether law enforcement could have forestalled the event, and whether the plans within the school were best suited to avoid and/or minimize the havoc that was experienced. The City Council cannot change gun policy, but on February 27, the School Department Oversight Committee will invite law enforcement and School Department officials to report on their programs and policies to protect our children against this terrible risk.

Last Wednesday also saw the School Department's presentation of its [5-year strategic plan](#). The plan covers academic achievement, learning time, staff development, customer service and resource allocation. The latter four of these five categories are largely within the School Department's internal operational structure, but the first category, student achievement, is not. Instead, student achievement is an "output" that is affected by many different factors, including but not limited to the disadvantages that students begin with (such as a lack of knowledge of the English language), the turnover within the student body and the challenges students face outside of school at home. When a 14-year old student enters Providence without an advanced education or knowledge of the English language, it likely will be a multi-year project to bring that student up to the State's proficiency standards. If that student comes in at a 6th grade level of knowledge and advances in his or her first year to an 8th grade level, then the year will be a good first step, but it will still be marked as a failure because the student will still be below grade level for his or her age. On the other end of the equation, an advanced student in the 6th grade who already reads at the 9th grade level will be marked as a success on the tests even if she learns nothing that year. For these reasons, the School Department Oversight Committee will, at its March 20 meeting, ask the School Department about the proficiency goals in its strategic plan, which (at 25% for mathematics and 33% for English language arts for high school students) do not on their face appear to mark a successful outcome.

At the same March 20 meeting, the Committee will review the School Department's 5-year budget. The School Department's overall budget is around \$400 million, and it has been increasing at an annual rate of around 2%. Last year, the City increased its contribution to the budget by \$3 million, the first such increase in seven years (dating back to the 2011 "fiscal hurricane.") Over the same period, federal Title I aid has declined, and is at risk of further cuts under the current administration. Fortunately for the City's children, the State has implemented a funding formula over that time which has added approximately \$40 million in State aid; however, this year's State aid increase will be the last in this series, and future increases are likely to be much more modest. The funding formula contains many gaps that hurt the children of Providence, such as the lack of a per pupil adjustment for English language learners, a common feature of other state formulas nationally. As a result, the School Department will need to make its case to the General Assembly and/or develop new revenue sources and/or cost savings to provide an education that meets the requirements of the State's Basic Education Plan.

Sincerely,

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