



March 16, 2014

Dear Fellow East Siders:

This week's ward letter discusses teacher retirement benefits, bus transportation and State education mandates.

During last Wednesday's Education Committee meeting, the Internal Auditor presented a [Report](#) on the cost of post-retirement benefits to Providence teachers compared to a peer group of nine other communities in the urban core and immediately surrounding ring of communities. The main three benefits are a retirement bonus for unused sick days, health benefits prior to age 65 and post-65 supplementary health benefits. Providence has the most generous payment for unused sick days, and is one of only two communities that offers post-65 supplementary coverage. The Auditor estimates these post-retirement benefits are worth roughly \$2,840 per year over a teacher's career, compared to an average of \$1,482 among the other communities. When one includes the value of retirement benefits, Providence's top step salary rises from 5<sup>th</sup> place among these ten communities to 3<sup>rd</sup> place, more than \$2,000 more than the average of its peers. This exercise shows that Providence teachers are receiving total compensation near the top of the peer community scale as the current contract negotiations begin.

Also last Wednesday, the Education Committee reviewed two resolutions regarding the School Board's policy of limiting bus passes for high school students to those who live three or more miles from their school "as the crow flies." Many other communities provide transportation for students who are two or more miles away from school. There are not any people who are opposed to the concept of providing more transportation; instead, the challenge is finding funds to cover the estimated \$1.2 million cost associated with this expansion in a school district that has many other funding challenges, including deferred maintenance, inadequate security measures and staffing, a lack of assistant principals in some schools, extremely limited arts and music programs, and the like. With that in mind, I have asked the Committee to consider an amendment to the resolution to ask the School Board to include the cost of additional bus transportation in next year's budget, to try to find the funds from other sources, but to be prepared to justify an increase in the local school budget if necessary. Given the fact that the City's contribution to the school budget has been flat for the past three years as enrollment has increased, it may be particularly difficult to maintain a flat budget next year.

The Education Committee also considered a second resolution asking the City Council to endorse state legislation requiring a 2-mile bus transportation limit statewide. While this would expand bus transportation for high school students, the method of imposing an unfunded state mandate is a problem, as Providence's school budget already is weighed down by multiple unfunded state mandates. As a result, I have proposed amending the resolution to replace its mandate with a change in the State's school aid funding formula to include transportation expenses. Rhode Island's school aid funding formula is one of only a small number nationally that does not include transportation expense as part of its base aid package; instead, in Rhode Island, local districts must pay for transportation with exclusively local funds. This exclusion makes no sense from a policy perspective, as transportation expenses are just as necessary to operate a school system as are instructional expenses. It is my hope that this debate will help remind Providence's General Assembly delegation of the actual needs our City's children have the next time they propose legislation to "help" the Providence public schools.

Sincerely,

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