

To the Members of the House Finance Committee:

My name is Samuel Zurier, and I appreciate the opportunity to offer testimony in support of House Bill No. 5193. I live in Providence, where my three children received a quality public school education that prepared them well for college and career. I had the privilege of serving on the Providence School Board in the early 2000's and on the Providence City Council during 2011-18. I believe the Providence Public Schools are at a difficult turning point, and that this bill's moratorium is needed to provide our public schools with a window of time in which to build a foundation for progress.

This Committee no doubt is familiar with the critical findings of the 2019 Johns Hopkins report, which the Department of Education used to justify the State's takeover of the Providence Public Schools. At the time, the State contended that the situation was sufficiently drastic that it was necessary to invoke the Crowley Act to achieve the necessary transformational change.

While I do not agree with all the findings of the Hopkins Report, I ask you please to pay attention to its investigators' conclusions that students and educators are held back by the poor quality of many Providence schools' physical environment and the district's general lack of amenities (including instruction in non-core areas, such as arts, civics, etc. and a lack of extracurricular activities) that better-resourced school districts provide. These resource deficits impose a constant drag on the progress of educators and students. Many teachers respond by reaching into their own pockets to purchase essential supplies, for which they deserve our praise and gratitude, while also raising serious questions about why we as a community are failing our educators and students in this basic way.

Although the general subject of public school finance is complex, there is no question that the State's current "money follows the child" funding program for charter schools is a form of "zero sum game" that has removed essential resources from the Providence Public Schools. While I was on the City Council, we conducted studies of the growth of charter schools that identified and quantified tens of millions of dollar of losses in State aid and charges on local funds in excess of any "savings" that would result from declining enrollments. In recent years, the General Assembly has enacted remedial legislation to mitigate some of these losses, but that legislation has only provided partial relief, particularly in the case of the Providence Public Schools, which has sustained the largest financial impact, both overall and per student, from the growth of charter schools. While the opening of new charter schools can provide new opportunities for a select group of Providence students, the resulting financial losses imposed on the 20,000-plus students and educators who remain has created a vicious cycle that contributed to the conditions leading to the State's takeover. If left unchecked, this vicious cycle could lead to a death spiral as families with a choice either abandon the Providence Public Schools, choose not to move to Providence, or choose to leave the City, while those children and families who remain strive to do their best in spite of a disappointing lack of community support.

Returning to the present, the State's takeover of the Providence Public Schools has yet to produce the dramatic results the State promised because of, among other things, two strong headwinds. First, we all have had to face the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, which started six months into the State takeover and two months after the appointment of a turnaround superintendent. Second, the State and the Providence Teachers Union have not agreed upon a new contract following the expiration of most recent one six months ago. It was the consensus of

the Hopkins Report, the Department of Education and the Providence Mayor that reforms to that contract (including if necessary those available under the Crowley Act) are a critical part of a successful State intervention, as is the support of the educators who must perform the necessary work in the classroom every day. The negotiations are currently in mediation, and while we all hope for the best, the situation is fraught.

Given all of these dynamics, the continued pressure of charter school growth has the potential not only of increasing the financial burdens on the Providence Public Schools, but also demoralizing the families and educators who are committed to its success, all at a time when the State has undertaken a drastic intervention that has yet to show tangible success, and which will be devastating and destabilizing if it does not turn around things soon.

For these reasons, I ask you please to support this legislation, which would allow the families and educators in Providence a window of time, in this storm of events, to right the ship.

Thank you for your consideration.