

SAM ZURIER

June 21, 2011

Dear Fellow East Siders:

While the City Council's main oversight over the Providence Public Schools relates to finances rather than education policy, I would like to describe an issue that involves both areas.

Seven years ago, the Providence Public Schools had the shortest class day in the State. The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) responded by enacting minimum class time regulations that require a minimum of 330 minutes of "instruction time" (excluding lunch time, passing time between class, and so forth) per day in schools. Providence adjusted to the new requirement by extending the school day slightly to achieve exactly the minimum amount of time required.

Providence remained in compliance until this fall, when RIDE issued regulations concerning teacher planning time. These regulations require middle and high schools to dedicate a minimum of one or two hours per week for teacher meetings, at which time the teachers can hone their craft, and discuss individual cases of children to protect them from "falling through the cracks."

This is a commendable policy, but it created a problem in Providence. The Superintendent asked the Teachers Union for help in scheduling planning time. The Union responded by requesting extra pay as stipulated in the collective bargaining agreement (CBA). The CBA specifies a 6-hour work day and 181-day work year; therefore, the Union requested that each teacher receive additional pay that would cost the District between \$40 and \$70 per hour per teacher after accounting for benefits, at a total cost of \$4 million to \$6 million. Because the School Department did not include this cost in its budget, it decided instead to schedule the planning time during the school day and dismiss children early, ending the middle school day one hour early on Tuesdays, and the high school day two hours early on Wednesdays. Over the course of a year (36 weeks), our middle school children lost more than one week of school, and our high school children lost almost three weeks of school. I learned about the change as a parent this fall, and researched the issue with the School Department, the School Board and RIDE in the months that followed. While school policy is not typically a City Council issue, I became concerned about the impact on our children's education, as well as the cost we will have to assume if (as I expect) RIDE enforces this requirement next year.

In City Council hearings, I reviewed this problem with the School Department. I informed them that I do not consider this year's compromise to be acceptable, even if it was the result of positive "collaboration" with the Teachers Union. Instead, I told them that they need to restore the class day to the State minimum next year, either by obtaining cooperation from the Teachers Union to adjust the teacher work day (the alternative I would prefer), or by reallocating the School Department budget to pay the teachers for this time as called for in the CBA. I learned that the School Department is talking with the State about how to comply with these requirements. I will try my best to ensure that any "solution" reached among the adults does not reduce the quality of our children's education.

Sincerely,

