

## SAM ZURIER

July 17, 2011

Dear Fellow East Siders:

During the last two nights of its session, the General Assembly enacted legislation to remove the Providence School Board's authority to approve collective bargaining agreements. The bill's sponsor stated he was concerned that the School Board would not approve the teachers' contract currently under negotiation. The Mayor supported the bill, stating that he believes that elected officials should be ultimately responsible for collective bargaining agreements.

I believe this legislation is based on a false premise, as the Providence School Board has approved every single collective bargaining agreement proposed over decades. I also believe it may produce unintended long-term consequences. I describe my concerns in a letter to Governor Chafee, which you can read at this link:

[http://www.samzurier.com/images/stories/articles/Ward\\_Letters/governor%20chafee%207-6-11.pdf](http://www.samzurier.com/images/stories/articles/Ward_Letters/governor%20chafee%207-6-11.pdf)

In my letter, I asked the Governor to postpone his action on the legislation to allow the parties time to talk further and (hopefully) find a compromise. I spoke with both sides about holding a meeting, and I believe from those discussions that a compromise might have been possible, especially if the School Board and the Mayor could talk more completely about the problems associated with alternative strategies. I spoke with the Mayor and individual School Board members, all of whom are dedicated public servants who, for the most part, share a common vision of education reform, with the hope that the parties could find a way to move forward. If they had reached such an agreement, the Mayor could have asked the Governor to veto the bill as unnecessary. Unfortunately, I was not able to persuade the parties to come together before the deadline for the Governor's action on the bill; he signed the bill and it became law.

I believe that it is good public policy for the School Board to approve collective bargaining contracts (especially for teachers) because (a) the School Board is responsible for developing education policy in our City, and (b) the teachers' contract has a profound impact on that policy. In other fields, collective bargaining agreements are limited to wages, benefits, hours and working conditions. In contrast, the Providence Teachers Union collective bargaining agreement is a 67-page document replete with work rules governing many areas of education policy, including but not limited to teacher assignments and standards of practice. These features steer contract negotiations towards trade-offs whereby the School Department has to "pay" for reforms with greater salaries and benefits. When there is no money (as is true now) it is tempting to accept reversals in education policy in return for financial savings. If we could limit the contract to the basic issues of wages, benefits, hours and working conditions, then it would be less important for the School Board to have a role in approving the contract. Under the current conditions in Providence, however, I believe the General Assembly's legislation removes an important check and balance. Despite this setback, however, I will continue my own efforts to foster more collaboration between all of our educational leaders going forward – we need everyone's help and cooperation to address the tremendous challenges we face in educating our children.

Sincerely,



[www.samzurier.com](http://www.samzurier.com)