

SAM ZURIER

September 5, 2011

Dear Fellow East Siders:

Last week, the State's Board of Regents rejected the application of the Achievement First organization to start a charter school in Cranston that would serve children from that city and from Providence. Our Mayor and City Council President supported the application, but the Governor opposed it, noting the opposition within Cranston. The Governor proposed that Achievement First submit a new application for a school based in Providence that would accept children from a broad range of communities. I was ambivalent about the application that the Board rejected last week, but I am hopeful that a new application along the lines proposed by the Governor would be better for all of the children in Providence.

The primary goal of a charter school is to provide a new (and hopefully better) education option for children within a public school district. The Achievement First program has a good track record elsewhere on which to stake such a claim. There are, however, several other impacts that inform my view of whether a particular charter school would be good for Providence. On the plus side, some charter schools share their ideas with local school districts, while also providing a model and example for the public schools to perform better.

On the other hand, a charter school places a strain on the finances of the host public school district. Currently in Providence, we fund our education budget with approximately \$7,500 per child of State aid and \$5,000 per child of City funds, plus federal and private aid. Under the State's "money follows the child" school aid formula, when a Providence child attends a charter school, both the State and the City funds are re-allocated to the charter school at the expense of the Providence Public Schools. Thus, for example, if a new charter school opens a kindergarten that accepts 26 Providence children, the charter school receives both around \$195,000 of State aid that Providence would have received for those children and around \$130,000 of City tax dollars, for a total of \$325,000 per year. In return, Providence could save the cost of a teacher (around \$100,000 total, including all benefits); however, it is not clear whether we could realize enough other savings to make up for the resulting loss of revenues.

The Achievement First application called for a large school, aiming for a total enrollment of 920 students by 2016-17, and 1,792 students seven years after that, with Providence providing half of those students. In the long run, Providence could recoup the largest amount of budgetary savings by closing one or more schools (which we know is not an easy process); however, the savings during the transition would not be commensurate. Also, the Mayor's office has negotiated a tentative agreement with the Providence Teachers Union (subject to City Council approval) which includes a "no layoff" clause. If this is approved, then a large charter school would remove several million dollars of revenues from the Providence Public Schools without the chance for anything close to matching savings. If, on the other hand, the Achievement First application is revised to become a smaller school that enrolls fewer Providence children, it may be possible to gain the benefits of a charter school without incurring the same scale of costs anticipated by the school described in last week's application. While I do not have a direct role in the City's or the State's review of the application, I will try where I can to advance this alternative, as well as the improvement of these and other problems in our State aid funding formula.

Sincerely,

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