

COMMENTARY

Step up for Providence schools, former superintendent asks every Rhode Islander

Susan Lusi asks Rhode Islanders to support a special commission's recommendations to move Providence schools forward. They include shifting substantial decision making to the school level, requiring adults to work together, and holding them accountable for doing so

By **Susan F. Lusi** Updated May 1, 2024, 6:00 a.m.



Providence School Department headquarters. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

People can debate whether the state takeover has improved Providence schools, but no one can contest that education in Providence remains a crisis for the city's approximately 20,000 public school students, their families, and the state of Rhode Island.

In school year 2023, 13.1 percent of Providence students were [proficient](#) in math, and 16.6 percent in English; [49 percent of students missed 10 percent or more](#) of the school year; and student learning has [not returned to pre-pandemic levels](#), particularly in math. Fifteen percent of Rhode Island public school students attend Providence Public Schools, and 82 percent of Providence students are [economically disadvantaged](#).

We know quality education can lift people out of poverty to the benefit of themselves, their families, and society. We want education in our capital city to attract — rather than deter — investment in our state and its economy.

A [special legislative commission](#) was created “to Review and Provide Recommendations for Professional and Labor-Management Standards that Provide School-Based Flexibility and Accountability for Employees of Providence Public Schools,” to explore ideas former union leader Steve Smith and I put forward in this December 2022 [opinion piece](#). While the commission's long name is insomnia inducing, every Rhode Islander should care about its [recommendations](#).

ADVERTISING

The [commission's report](#) articulates a new and bold vision for Providence Schools. It features a work environment that attracts and retains high-quality, diverse educators with a commitment to working together to provide quality education for every student. It also calls for giving teachers meaningful participation in important educational decisions, as well as the responsibility and authority to maintain high standards within the profession.

The report's four recommendations would create the key conditions needed to move Providence schools forward, recognizing that additional work will need to be done locally.

The recommendations are to:

1. Negotiate a contract that moves substantial decision making to the school level, and: requires adults to work together on behalf of students — guided by best practice; holds them accountable for doing so; and includes differentiated compensation based on teaching assignment, additional responsibilities, and a track record of performance, as opposed to seniority only. The [contract for the Springfield, Mass., Empowerment Zone](#) is cited as a model.
2. Provide support and training so teachers and administrators learn to work together effectively in these new ways.
3. Amend state law, specific to Providence, to remove legislative barriers, in order to:

Base teacher layoffs on criteria in addition to seniority;

Expedite due process when the union and administration agree that a teacher's performance is unacceptable, thereby avoiding a costly process for both sides;

Negotiate a career ladder that rewards Providence teachers for taking on additional leadership roles and responsibilities, as opposed to only years of service and training;

and,

Clarify the [Crowley act](#) — the R.I. law that allows the state to take control of a school district — so that the state can require action if changes aren't accomplished through negotiations.

4. Ensure that administrators are held accountable for establishing and actively supporting collaborative decision-making.

Sharing decision making and accountability in these ways is an unnatural act in the current system. Two of 13 voting [members appointed to the commission](#) are union representatives. Their response to the recommendations is indicative of the adversarial approach bred out of the current system — just say no and shoot the messengers. They critique the proposals as “anti-teacher,” even though the most recent Empowerment Zone contract in Springfield was [ratified by 96 percent of teachers](#), and Educators for Excellence [presented data](#) indicating broad teacher support for similar ideas. Unacknowledged, too, are the [leadership](#) roles both played when Mr. Smith and I worked to negotiate similar ideas in Providence in 2013, joined at the bargaining table by a representative from the American Federation of Teachers.

Smith and I are critiqued as “people who walked away from the district,” implying that we have no right to put ideas forward. Nothing could be further from the truth.

At a time when Providence students need more support than ever, it's disappointing that anyone would be discouraged from working to improve Providence schools. I ask every Rhode Islander to step up:

Read the [draft report](#) and watch the commission's vote on the report on May 6 via [Capitol TV](#);

Contact your legislators and city leaders and ask them to support these recommendations to improve Providence schools; and

Scrutinize the upcoming Providence negotiations and their results.

The union is right that leadership churn in Providence has been a barrier to progress. That is why I want teachers at the leadership table in full partnership with administrators making decisions about what needs to happen in schools, and I want contractual and legislative structures that support and require it. Both sides need to shape the future of education in Providence, and be held accountable for delivering it.

Dr. Susan F. Lusi was superintendent of schools in Providence from 2011-2015. Since that time, she has led [Mass Insight Education & Research](#).

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