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## City of Providence, Rhode Island

July 6, 2011

### VIA HAND DELIVERY

The Honorable Lincoln Chafee  
Governor, State of Rhode Island  
Rhode Island State House  
Providence, RI 02904

Re: Senate Bill 1062B (Powers of appointed school boards)

Dear Governor Chafee:

I write to request that you allow the full six days permitted under law before acting upon Senate Bill 1062B, which seeks to remove the Providence School Board's authority for approving collective bargaining agreements. This bill was placed on your desk yesterday (July 5); therefore, the six-day window for your action upon will remain open until the close of business on Monday, July 11. I propose that you allow the Mayor of Providence and the Providence School Board those days to reach agreement on the pending negotiations for the Providence Teachers Union contract, thereby rendering moot the predicate for the enactment of this bill. Should they reach such an agreement, I am hopeful that you could then veto what would become an unnecessary bill.

I was not familiar with this legislation until this past Wednesday afternoon, shortly after it passed the Rhode Island Senate. The original bill was designed to eliminate appointed school boards statewide, but in the session's final two days it was amended to surgically remove a single power (approval of collective bargaining agreements) from a single school board (Providence, the only school board with appointed members that currently is not in receivership). According to media accounts, the legislation's sponsor introduced this amendment because he heard that the Providence School Board was not willing to support a contractual framework that the Mayor and Providence Teachers Union were negotiating.

Providence has had an appointed school board for decades. Over that time, the Providence School Board has approved scores of collective bargaining agreements without a single controversy, often improving those agreements with the benefit of their input. As a result, I do not believe that the current legislation responds to a longstanding problem; instead, it represents a powerful, but blunt instrument to address a very specific issue.

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The Honorable Lincoln Chafee  
July 6, 2011  
Page Two

We in Providence are fortunate to have a talented and committed Mayor, who already has made several difficult choices to help restore the City's well-being. We also are fortunate to have a talented and committed School Board, who reviewed and approved the difficult decisions the Mayor recommended for the Providence School Department. In performing this role, the School Board assisted the Mayor by facilitating public discussion, and by improving upon his initiatives. From my discussions with both parties, I believe their respective visions for education reform in Providence are at least 95% congruent. I also believe it is possible that some or much of the General Assembly's perception of an impasse regarding the teachers' contract is due to a lack of information, as the School Board has not yet had the benefit of the a full briefing of the contract or the Mayor's best case for why it must be approved. In the past 24 hours, I have spoken with several School Board members who have an open mind about approving the contract, depending upon the content of details with which they are not yet familiar.

If the Mayor and School Board could reach agreement on this contract, we could save ourselves from the potential unintended consequences of Bill 1062B. If the School Board is stripped of this essential responsibility, many current members may decide to leave, and many other members of the public will be deterred from applying. The turnover could be harmful in the short run, as the Providence Public Schools already has lost its top two leaders. In the longer run, the Providence School Board, whose exclusive mission is to serve the children, could lose its ability to serve as an important check and balance. Also worrisome is the fact that the current bill, if enacted, would not only give the Providence Mayor exclusive authority to enter into all collective bargaining agreements, but also would confer upon him concurrent authority to enter into all other contracts, no matter how trivial. (See proposed amended section 16-2-9(a)(26)©.) This could present every vendor to the Providence Public Schools with two bites at every apple, creating additional layers to every decision and transaction.

For these reasons, I ask you please to consider the advantages of allowing the Providence Mayor and the Providence School Board a few extra days to engage in further dialogue and possible compromise on the Providence Teachers Union contract, so that they can fulfill the principal goal of the legislation without risking the unintended consequences that the current wide-ranging bill may produce. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Samuel D. Zurier  
Member, Providence City Council  
Member, Providence School Board, 2000-02

cc: Mayor Taveras  
Claire Richards, Esq.