

# Don't give Achievement First both charters

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**I**n January, the Board of Regents will review an application by Achievement First to open two separate, free-standing "mayoral academy" schools that would educate a total of 920 elementary school students. As proposed, the application seeks the first Rhode Island charter to approve two schools at once on a scale never before seen. (In the future, AF plans to open middle and high schools to create a K-12 program in Providence that would serve up to 2,000 students.)

These circumstances suggest that the Board of Regents should not limit itself to a simple all-or-nothing vote. Instead, it should consider approving the first AF school now, and allow some time before deciding whether to award a charter to the second school. This alternative, which was recommended as part of a more extensive analysis in a report by the Providence City Council Education Subcommittee (available online at <http://council.providence-ri.com/node/412>), would bring almost all of the advantages identified by the school's proponents, while mitigating the potential harms identified by its opponents.

AF's supporters point to its track record in Connecticut and New York. In the Nutmeg State, AF schools close the achievement gap for students enrolled overwhelmingly from disadvantaged communities (99 percent from the African-American and Latino communities, 72 percent from poverty).

If allowed to come to Rhode Island, AF could introduce innovative programs based partly on the gift of time, namely a school day of 8 hours and 45 minutes. This would represent a stark contrast to the 6-hour, 5-minute

class day currently offered in Providence elementary schools. AF could provide some parents with a choice, while spurring Providence Public Schools to consider this and other sensible reforms that historically have been vetoed at the bargaining table. An AF school also could leverage substantial private resources from such sources as the Broad and Carnegie foundations.

AF's opponents emphasize the costs the school would impose on children who do not gain admission. As documented in the City Council report, the "two school" AF proposal would cost the Providence Public Schools between \$6 million and \$9 million per year once fully online, depending upon how many Providence children enroll in the school, even after assuming savings from reducing the number of Providence Public School teachers.

Particularly with the higher-enrollment alternatives, it is likely Providence will have to close an elementary school to create financial space for Achievement First, a painful process. What is more, a state law (Section 16-13-6) may require teacher layoffs on the strict basis of seniority. Therefore, Providence may need to consider "bumping" again if it wishes to reduce the number of teachers to match the decline in enrollment. Finally, a commitment of 920 students to AF may crowd out other mayoral academy proposals, such as one recently filed by the Meeting Street School for a "full inclusion" school for children with profound needs.

In light of these competing concerns, the Education Subcommittee Report recommends that the board approve the first AF school (480 students, K-5), but wait three years before con-

sidering the second one (440 students, K-4). The report notes that the Rhode Island mayoral academy law is specifically structured to mix urban and suburban children in each school. The demographic profiles of Cranston, North Providence and Warwick are very different from Bridgeport, Hartford and New Haven or the AF Schools operating within those cities, and AF will probably need to change its recruiting strategy, and possibly its academic program, to create a successful mayoral academy in Rhode Island.

More generally, the current AF schools focus like a laser on bringing the opportunity of education to society's most disadvantaged. This is an important and commendable goal, but it is not the exclusive goal of public education. At their best, our public schools bring the American Dream to people from all walks of life, including the disadvantaged, but also including the middle class. For a city to thrive, its public schools must educate the entire public.

Achievement First can provide an important service to a deserving slice of our student population. With that said, we need time to find out if its urban model can translate successfully to a mayoral academy's urban/suburban template or, alternatively, whether an AF school in Rhode Island would retain the program's focus on the disadvantaged. For that reason, the Providence City Council Education Subcommittee recommends that the Board of Regents should consider approving the application's first school, while deferring on the second one.

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