

SAM
ZURIER

September 28, 2011

Dear Fellow East Siders:

Last night, the City Council approved the police and teachers contracts. Both passed unanimously, but my vote in favor of the teachers contract was my most difficult one yet. As I will now describe, I ultimately voted to approve the contract because it was the best alternative available in extremely difficult circumstances.

Our public schools went through turbulence earlier this year after Superintendent Brady resigned and we endured a round of school closures and teacher terminations. Most of our teachers responded with grace and professionalism, even as many of them worried about their job security. Although the School Department always intended to retain more than 90% of the teachers, some people induced unnecessary panic by claiming otherwise. Rightly or wrongly, many teachers entered school this year feeling demoralized. In this climate, I suspect that the administration set a deadline to reach an agreement by the start of the school year, with a relatively high tolerance for the terms it would accept to achieve this goal. Had the parties not reached an agreement, our difficult labor climate could have become significantly worse.

The contract projects to save around \$30 million over its three year term, while introducing a teacher evaluation program by agreement. These savings will be temporary, however, due to 3% pay increases awarded at the beginning and the end of the contract's third year. Also, the contract contains a partial "no layoff" clause that prevents the District from using fiscal exigency as a basis for finding "good cause" to terminate a teacher. The practical meaning of this clause is far from clear. I believe it is likely that a court will be asked to interpret that clause, and the outcome of that case could affect the City's ability to manage its school budget. The Superintendent and the Mayor understand this risk, and accept full responsibility for managing it successfully.

The new evaluation system offers a path to improved teacher quality over time. In the short run, however, the contract also has a teacher placement and hiring policy that will prolong the career of ineffective teachers until they have had sufficient time to be properly evaluated. In order for the School Department to make full use of the new tools the contract provides, it will be necessary for its human resources office to work more effectively than it has in the past. This is another major undertaking for the new Superintendent and the School Board with both risk and possible significant return.

On Monday, the School Board enacted a resolution formally stating that the Superintendent's signature on the tentative agreement is not binding on the School Board. I spoke with the Mayor about this, and he informed me that he sees value in the School Board's independent role, and he is ready to provide them with resources to help them pursue it.

I pledge to work on the Education Subcommittee to monitor how our schools perform under this contract, and to help create conditions that will ensure that our next contract accomplishes more than the one we just enacted. In closing, I would like to thank the parents of the schools in our neighborhood and elsewhere for their advocacy on this issue. I am committed to using my position on the Council to provide you with a platform to have your voice heard more clearly on this and other important education issues in the coming years.

Sincerely,

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