

October 19, 2023

To: Senate Policy Analyst Morgan DiMaio

Senator Samuel Zurier

From Katherine Scheidler, Ed.D. former teacher, Hope High School

131 Transit Street, Providence, RI 401-751-7312

Re: **Resolution S- 1131** State Senate review of professional standards of labor-management of the Providence Public Schools as this relates to the quality of student learning for Providence students

Please see my credentials below for my school observations here.

I'm surprised and delighted to learn that the Senate is reviewing the Providence labor-management issue, in particular how the Providence Teachers Union boldly holds back the quality of student learning in Providence schools.

Specifically, the union gets its way on all issues because it's allowed to. This has to change, forced by state law, for the quality of student learning.

The recent release on Oct. 17 of the spring, 2023 state test RICAS and SAT scores, required by federal law to monitor student learning, show once again, as they do annually, that learning in Providence schools is in crisis. Because I taught English for over 25 years at Hope High School, once a fine school that East Side families sent their children to, I especially monitor Hope High School's state test RICAS scores, which in RI is the SAT test, which helps with college acceptance and financial aid. (Looking at average Providence scores isn't useful, because Classical High School's scores are always so strong, with 86% Proficient and Advanced in English in 2022, 84% Proficient and Advanced in English in 2023, 57% Proficient and above in math in 2023, which boosts the school district average.)

In 2022, Hope eleventh graders scored 66% below Proficient in English on the state test, and over 95% below Proficient in math, unacceptable. (When a school is over 95% below Proficient, the exact percentage is not reported. Who wants to see 100% below Proficient?) Now in 2023, these scores haven't changed. Today's report is 64% below Proficient in English (with only 36% Proficient, none Advanced), with the same 2023 over 95% below Proficient in math. These rock-bottom scores are unacceptable. For over 15 years I worked as district head of teaching and learning in varied Massachusetts districts,

and of 360 districts, only a tiny number, and in larger districts, come even close to this. There's no excuse for Providence, a relatively small urban district, to have test scores so low.

The Providence Teachers Union blocking many initiatives, under the guise of protecting teachers, is largely responsible for such low scores and must be reined in. Most egregiously, the PTU protects the jobs of grossly incompetent teachers who shouldn't be allowed in classrooms, went over the Commissioner of Education's head to go to the Governor for the current teachers' contract approval, and has ousted a good Hope principal in earlier years and ousted in 2019 the Superintendent and his assistant who were appointed by the current Commissioner of Education. Such gross outrageous union going beyond norms to get their way must stop, for the sake of students. We need laws to protect schools from the union running the Providence schools.

The low level of teaching and learning in Providence schools – which leads middle class families to pay exorbitant costs to attend the local private schools, or turn to the charter schools, or move to Barrington – is largely impacted by the Providence Teachers Union steadfastly balking at any change that would improve the schools.

The excellent current Commissioner of Education, Infante-Green, on a major issue, has been trying for years to require teacher training professional development for all teachers, as Massachusetts, and other states, have required for years. Massachusetts teachers comply with the Department of Education requirement to obtain professional development and stay current with teaching best practice. Would we want a doctor to do what doctors did twenty years ago?

When the Commissioner, in charge of Providence schools due to state takeover, attempted to negotiate with the current union contract for required teacher professional development, negotiations faltered. The union stood firm against requiring continued training. The PTU then went directly to the Governor, who understandably lacks understanding of nuances in public education, and seeks voter approval, handed the issue to an assistant and the teachers union got their way in all areas, including no requirement for teachers to have on-going professional development, keeping learning in the dark ages, with no stimulation to improve the quality of teaching and learning. In normal school districts, the union leadership meets with the district superintendent, and they negotiate and over time come to agreement. Our current excellent Commissioner, coming from New York state, where she was Assistant Commissioner, had attempted to bring Providence teachers to normal expectations, acting as head of the Providence

district because it was in state takeover due to low state test scores. The union brazenly ignored her leadership.

In normal school district union contract negotiations, the union leaders meet with the superintendent to resolve issues. Going over the head of the Commissioner to go to the Governor (who wants union votes) to get contract approval and keep schools behind is outrageous. While this is just one of the egregious union actions, this act alone should have been a crisis leading to a change in state law. No one, it seemed, noticed. The PTU has always gotten its way, including with teacher salary increases with no benefits that would help school improve, as often happens in contract negotiations, a two-way street. With the PTU, it's always one-way.

Teacher pay is another issue, a proposal that former PTU head Steven Smith and former Superintendent Sue Lusi make in their opinion piece "Call to Action: Union, Management Must Blow Up Providence's Broken School System" in "The 74" publication, Dec. 14, 2022. They raise the plight of teachers only getting a salary increase determined by years of service. This especially hurts teacher morale and lets teachers know all they have to do is show up and they'll get paid more. Some, even many, as we know from the Johns Hopkins report, don't even show up, and they continue to get paid. Usually in a school study district evaluators don't look at teacher absenteeism. In the Providence study by the Hopkins team they did, and found a large percentage of teachers absent over ten percent of the time, many absent even more. The report found over 30% of Providence teachers chronically absent. This has been all because the union allows this, protecting high teacher absenteeism.

With Providence struggling for substitute teachers, because school conditions are so bad, this means students are herded into a cafeteria, a holding spot, not a classroom, as reported in the Hopkins report. Further, incompetent teachers still hold their jobs when they should not be allowed in a classroom, affecting morale and how other teachers are undermined with no student behavior or learning standards, affecting the whole school. When bad apples are allowed in the classroom, the full school suffers, as former union head Steve Smith mentions in the opinion piece.

Regarding the salary issue that Lusi and Smith raise, if instead of protecting the poorest teachers, if teachers were given a supplemental stipend based on their students' RICAS scores, we'd see student learning and the quality of teaching spike up. When finally the current Commissioner was able to get required teacher training approved by the union, only for this year, in a miraculous deal, it was only because all Providence teachers would get paid for an extra half-hour of school, by use of Covid funds, with its last year this year. When under the Governor's purview the current union contract was approved,

every teacher who voted to approve the contract received \$2,000, again unheard of for teachers to be paid to vote to approve a contract. Why then can't good teachers who help students learn and go all out for students get paid a stipend when their students' test scores increase? Other states do this. The union charges that merit pay would be subjective. If test scores demonstrate competence, and that teacher is rewarded, school culture would change, students would learn the good areas tested on the state test. Instead, in Providence, there's no incentive to teach your best; burn-out and malaise prevail among faculties. I hear this negativity about their jobs all the time from Providence teachers. Problems proliferate, due to the union blocking any attempt to improve schools and student learning. Even the ambitious high morale and love of students we're fortunate to have with the young, well-educated Brown student teachers and teachers is squelched when they see absent and marginally competent teachers getting paid high salaries.

I must add that the management side of the Providence schools must also be looked at, as Mr. Smith mentions in the opinion piece "Call to Action". When teachers feel they're being dictated to, they tend to resist. In the case of state testing, since it's a national test with tested areas developed by national subject area experts, and teachers are able to come up with their own ways of how to develop the learning, teachers have leeway here. While they're prescribed with good learning guides, federal expectations state they're free to determine *how* they teach. But not in Providence, where teachers are saddled with district-determined material, not their choice. The Providence central office has been leveling requirements that hinder rather than help learning. A few years ago, pre-covid, Providence teachers were required to have students use the Kahn Academy online math program with students, totally inappropriate for urban students. Teachers were bewildered that students were required to sit in front of a computer screen and just randomly tap keyboard keys till the program allowed them to move on to the next undecipherable question. A strong Hope Department Chair told me, "They're not learning anything."

Next, the good long-block class schedule that everyone loved in the high schools was abruptly changed to a seven-period rotating class time with briefer classes that even stymied teachers. No one in the schools knew why this new schedule was foisted on them, but I learned from visiting the central office that it was in response to a federal Office of Civil Rights violation. The new schedule allowed for double class periods of English Language learning for "Limited English Language Learners". But since Providence schools, especially Hope, had few qualified teachers of English as a Second Language, now termed Multi-Lingual Learners, having those double periods didn't mean

any student learned English better, often just shunted into a cafeteria, and it was just a bewildering new schedule that hurt learning for the rest of the school.

In the current year, Providence English teachers are required to use a new electronic computer system program that no one likes. If instead of constantly imposing ways to teach on Providence teachers there could be, as Steven Smith argues, a dialogue between teachers and what's termed the "downtown" administrators sitting in their quiet offices would have a chance to flourish. Inappropriate central office decisions on how to teach -- ignorant in the sense of not knowing the classroom situation and the students and teachers -- leads teachers to distrust system-wide decisions, and turn to obey the union, because it protects them and seems to support them, while central office-required expectations seem out of body strange decision-making oblivious to student and teacher needs.

I could go on.

I propose a solution: In the mid-1980's, a Brown University professor and national school change leader Ted Sizer created a new program at Hope that worked miraculously well. We had just two long-block classes a day, in place of today's five classes a day, and only 50 students a day, instead of today's 100. A teacher of English, History, Math and Science all shared the same students, with school day time for these teachers to meet and confer. This was magical. We each cared about our shared students, and had the use of time that allowed us to think and plan. We weren't frazzled at the end of the day, running out the door, but voluntarily stayed after school to help our students. We taught just one course, not multiple courses. I taught 9th grade English, just one course for all our students. Students weren't tracked into different levels of learning, which we have today in Providence high schools. Hope was racially integrated. Students transferred from Classical to our program, where they saw teachers cared and learning was interesting and student-centered. I was able to team-teach with a history teacher, fun for us and for the students, to see the two courses melded. Teachers acted as advisers to students we had in our classes, unlike today. Our students soared in learning, but without data at the time that showed students learned, the program was shut down by a new superintendent.

Especially with today's learning loss due to covid era school shutdown, and high Providence student absenteeism, in part due to "remote learning," such more inventive programs are direly needed, to support teachers and students. Dropping electronic required programs on teachers only backfires in resistance and low morale. Maintaining

(and highly paying) teachers who shouldn't be in classrooms demoralizes all. Teachers just think, Doesn't anyone care?

There are better ways to work than what Providence has today. As Lusi and Smith state, a hard re-set is long overdue. If Providence shifted to a focus on improving the quality of student learning, it would be revolutionary, and bring education equity, social mobility, and lifelong learning to Providence students. They wouldn't be clamoring to get into the small charter schools. Millions are now being spent on building repairs. Why not pay the best of the best a bit extra and improve student learning?

I earned degrees from The American University School of International Service in Washington, DC; Masters in Teaching English, Brown University; graduate degree, Harvard Graduate School of Education; and doctorate, the School of Education, Boston University. I taught for over 25 years at Hope High School, Providence, and for 8 years concurrently served as Brown Education Department clinical professor teaching Methods of Teaching. I then moved to Massachusetts school district leader as Assistant Superintendent and district Curriculum Director for teaching and learning in varied districts, helping guide the first wave of new state standards and tests initiated in the Reagan presidency and implemented in the Clinton era of new accountability legislation and through George W. Bush's ambitious and much-reviled No Child Left Behind era, followed by the Obama administration's less stringent approach to standards and testing. I now support teachers in online courses in helping to fulfill the promise of no child left behind.

I'm author, "Standards Matter," Montgomery, Ala.: NewSouth Books, 2015, and "Renegade Teacher: Inside School Walls with Standards and the Test," which explains how testing helps boost student learning. Luminare Press, 2023.