



March 18, 2024

Good evening, Senator Zurier and fellow Commissioners:

My apologies for not being here this evening, but I was at a leadership conference with my professional Union. Upon reading this second draft, I was initially at a loss for words, finding little to no changes after serious concerns and several suggestions from the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers, the Providence Teachers Union, and our siblings from the National Education Association RI have been raised.

As we started on this journey months ago, I was cautious, guarded, and somewhat curious as to the charge of this Commission. Still, we participated with our full attention and interest, focusing on the hope that this Commission could effectuate changes that would serve to support teachers and elevate new opportunities to give our students the education they deserve. However, it became immediately clear that the outcomes of this committee had been predetermined, and its mission had nothing to do with student success but rather an attack on collective bargaining and Providence teachers. The level of personal privilege and opinions asserted without data throughout this process has been astonishing. The Providence Teachers Union has provided evidence of the solutions-driven negotiating items that we continue to bring to the table since the beginning of this Takeover. Yet, there is zero mention of any of these efforts or mention of the initiatives we have tried to collaborate on over these past four years, including, but not limited to the creation of a professional development program with RIFR and AFT support to fulfill the obligations of Rhode Island general law and the Right to Read Act (that was dismissed out of hand because it was created by the union and in its place millions were spent on a LETRs contract). There was no acknowledgment of the work our union has done with families and the community to engage in conversations that are relevant to improving our schools (coffee at the curb, Town Hall Meetings, attending community meetings), no acknowledgment of the hundreds of resignations that we have endured under this Takeover of teachers not leaving the profession but leaving the district to be welcomed and valued for their broad ranging skills and talents, no acknowledgment or recognition of the fact that teachers are not allowed to choose curriculum but are so disrespected that we are told precisely what to teach or what day for an allotted time from highly scripted curriculum products that have taken the joy of learning and teaching.

It has been made abundantly clear from its Inception that this commission's charge has been an attack on Providence Teachers and their collective bargaining rights. Perhaps I, too, should have written an op-ed of revisionist history waxing nostalgic to a time when Mr. Smith was president and did nothing to promote

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his aspirational recommendations neither in the House where he served for over a decade nor in his role as president. Two people who walked away from the district when things started to get tough are now returning to impart their wisdom and beliefs when neither have lived through a Takeover nor have they taught in decades let alone in a post-pandemic world.

Perhaps Providence teachers would have been better served by me on this Commission if I had been able to wax nostalgic on the way things used to be, pre-Takeover and pre-Covid, but alas I did not. I have listened to the “bad teacher narrative” from Commissioners who admittedly have no understanding, no experience, and no evidence to substantiate such rhetoric. There has been no evidence, facts or data cited to support the assertion that increasing the time it takes to reach tenure will do anything to increase student students’ success.

Over the past month, I have witnessed over 300 teachers displaced, through no fault of their own, apply to positions in their school or within the district. Looking at the hard data from these displacements, it is clear that ageism is afoot, as in Redesign schools over 40% of teachers displaced are over the age of 40. Yet, the report attacks seniority and ignores the experience, dedication, hard work and thousands of hours of professional development that more seniors bring to their craft every day. All because you hate the word seniority. Every other District in the state values and celebrates veteran teachers for the skills and the talents that they bring to their students every day. Since the beginning of the school year, through the term of this Commission, we have also closed two more schools in our District. And while few have rung the alarm bell of crumbling schools louder than we have over the past 10 years, and welcome the idea of newer and fewer, we are concerned about the process by which these closures happen. The process by which schools are closed excludes the very people we serve, parents, families, community, teachers and our students. Our families, communities, students are further marginalized by these exclusions. We, along with state and community leaders, families and students demand a process for school closures that is inclusive rather than exclusive of the people we serve, which would have made an actionable and acceptable recommendation for this Commission.

During this process, Massachusetts has been referenced within this Committee as models for contract language and academic achievement and while there are great things happening in Massachusetts, little mention has been made of how they got here. Twenty-five years ago, they made a plan and stuck with it, they supported the foundational plan with financial backing through legislation and regardless of who was in educational leadership positions from Commissioners to superintendents they stayed with their plan.

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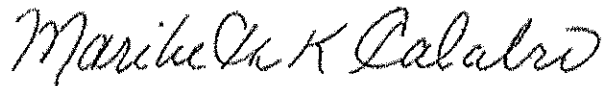
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The same cannot be said for Rhode Island or Providence Schools with every new leadership team, from Governor to Commissioner comes change. Changes in mission, vision, curriculum product choice etc. We literally course correct ever three years. How can we expect to effectuate long-term, sustainable, meaningful change when we are constantly pivoting. The constant churn of leadership coupled with the unfunded and underfunded mandates and fiscal obligations not being met by city and state leaders have done nothing to improve Providence Public Schools as a whole. But know this, the very teachers being criticized and the very contract you are trying to destroy are coming to work every day with one focus and that is educating our students so they may be successful, well-rounded individuals who show the world that they are more than a test score; they are leaders, thinkers, creators, builders, readers, dreamers, scientists, mathematicians, musicians, artists, and anything else they aspire to be. Our teachers make that happen not legislation, no Op-eds and not regulations. Teachers, plain and simple.

In closing, on behalf of the professional teachers of the PTU, I reject this document in its entirety and want this letter attached to the final report so it is abundantly clear what the PTU thinks and feels about this wasted opportunity. We had another chance to do something great with this Commission, and it was squandered to satisfy the desires of leaving a legacy and circumventing the collective bargaining process rather than focusing on supporting teachers and providing the fiscal support necessary to create schools where our students are not only thriving but have opportunities and access to more than the bare minimum.

I will be named on the committee as an attendee only, as it is clear that no considerations, suggestions, or feedback from PTU or RIFT have been included in this document. As a result, I will no longer be attending any future Commission meetings, as I can effectuate more positive change in my district by focusing on the needs of our students and teachers in collaboration with PPSD.

Professionally,



Maribeth K. Calabro

President

Providence Teachers Union

A Union of Professionals