March 18, 2024

Chair Zuirier and Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to give feedback about the second draft report of this commission. Part of our charge is to address labor-management issues within Providence Public Schools. I was hopeful that we might finally begin to address the root causes of a dysfunctional system that has seen over six hundred teacher resignations over the past four years. While it is certainly true that PPSD has needed more support since I was a kindergarten student at Broad Street Elementary, it is also true that the state takeover has made things significantly worse. The governor and the general assembly are responsible for the current state. Unchecked power was granted to one individual and there has been no oversight or accountability. Students, families, and educators have been marginalized.

This commission was inspired by an op-ed written by Dr. Lusi and Mr. Smith, but neither has been part of PPSD for a decade. In fact, the legacy Mr. Smith left behind has contributed to mass resignations that plague the district. The past concessions to management have been rejected by teachers because administrators have abused the management rights Mr. Smith bargained for. There was a promise that concessions would lead to collaboration. This has not been the case. This report’s recommendations for even more management control do not provide solutions to the existing dysfunction. It’s telling that RIDE has failed to improve conditions while they have the most management friendly CBA in the state.

We have worked together to learn how we can help create a school system that meets the needs of all students, families, and educators. There is clearly not is not a technical solution for the problem. We must create conditions where teams, trust, and transparency can thrive. As we heard from those who testified before this commission, trust cannot be legislated. Trust cannot exist when management has no interest in building it. We began meeting six months ago. In that time, RIDE and PPSD violated their own Turnaround Action Plan. They closed a fifth school without community engagement then opposed legislation that would require a clear process for community voice. When students, families, and teachers showed up at public meetings to advocate for their communities, RIDE limited space, locked the door, and called the police. RIDE testified against legislation that would allow students an active role on the K12 Council. Bosses have cultivated a toxic environment based on fear. This is not an administration that values collaboration. Teacher collaboration at five redesign schools has been met with bad faith and targeted displacement of skilled veteran educators. This report does nothing to address the core problem.

This draft is an attack on collective bargaining rights. Plain and simple. It does not provide the triage needed to put us on the path to meet the aspirational goals this commission discussed.

This document uses the labels professional and industrial unionism. Teachers are professionals. In fact, the phrase “a union of professionals” is attached to the American Federation of Teachers logo. PTU is ready, willing, and able to have a voice in “the content and delivery of teaching and learning.” Labels are not necessary; a climate of trust is. Management must be committed to creating a partnership that extends beyond bargaining salary, working conditions, and benefits. We have heard testimony that management has not been willing to accept that partnership. The collective bargaining agreement already includes language for collaborative leadership teams and school flexibility. The framework is in place for collaboration. I oppose any recommendation for statutory changes. PTU has offered solutions in bargaining such as community schools, wraparound services, funding changes, class size limits, support for unique learners, and family access. RIDE rejected the union’s partnership.

We were allowed only a short amount of time to review this draft, but I will give feedback and highlight specific concerns throughout this evening’s session. I do not support the current draft. I oppose any suggestion of change to state statute. I reject this document as an attack on collective bargaining.

Respectfully,

Jeremy Aaron Sencer

Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals