

## **Op Ed from Steven F. Smith, President Providence Teachers Union**

### **Where We Stand**

No one cares more about improving our city's schools and boosting student performance than the classroom teachers who serve the children of the Providence School System. Educational progress requires a shared responsibility that includes teachers, principals, school district officials, parents, community leaders and students. When there is collaboration among all of the stakeholders, much more will get done with far less confusion and greater participation by all members of the school community.

As the experts who live it day in and day out, classroom teachers want to be a part of the discussion—and decision-making—on the city's educational policy. Until that happens, we're relegated to reacting to what's being done *to* our schools. And, unfairly, if we disagree on something, we're labeled "obstructionists" or proponents of the status quo. What would work best for Providence schools is for teacher-school management collaboration, not confrontation.

Take the latest corrective action offered by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). Its goal of improving the quality of education is laudable. But its road map to get there is terribly deficient. The plan ignores necessary elements for comprehensively tackling the obstacles to educational progress, such as chronic discipline problems, overcrowded classes and lack of early childhood education. RIDE's plan focuses almost entirely on staffing issues—the random removal or reassignment of teachers—and its implementation is being left to an administration that is more concerned about looking good as opposed to being good.

The Providence Teachers Union (PTU) opposes the administration's Criterion-Based Hiring (CBH) system, not because we are opposed to criteria, but because there *is* no criteria. As a result, teachers have experienced numerous inequities and injustices while seeking employment under CBH:

In one instance, a National Board certified teacher with 19 years of experience in Providence with excellent evaluations was deemed less suitable for a position than another candidate, a teacher without any experience who had only recently graduated from college. Under CBH, highly qualified Middle School Endorsed teachers were denied the opportunity to interview for positions at the new Bishop middle school and Perry middle school. The interview system is flawed and inconsistent, allowing some candidates to interview by phone, while others are asked to present 40-minute PowerPoint presentations. These are just a few examples highlighting the flaws of CBH.

CBH was supposed to provide stability within the district. This has not been the case. There are currently over 70 positions with temporarily assigned teachers. Most of these positions have been posted numerous times. The Providence School District simply

cannot handle the volume for six schools. What will happen next year, when this program is expanded to all 50 schools?

Teacher interviews and participation in school reform is not new to the Providence School System. We have an opportunity to build on the progress that was made under former Superintendent Melody Johnson, who was able to bring staff stability and effective reforms to several low-performing schools—Hope High School, Perry Middle School, and Textron and Times2 charter schools. We created Site-Based schools where teachers had to be interviewed and played an active role in designing programs to improve student achievement. Dr. Johnson recognized that the best way to fix a school is to work with the classroom teachers who ultimately would have to implement the education reform ideas. The proof is in the pudding—all of the schools made significant gains in student attendance and test scores.

Unfortunately, it seems the hard work and success at Hope and the other schools will be unraveled and replaced with a system that would uproot teachers from their current assignments and place them into new classrooms or schools with no thought given to experience level or academic gains. Put simply, this plan spells disaster. Providence Teachers want the opportunity to work with the administration on a better plan that includes the staffing issue as well as other key reforms. The overall plan must be beneficial to students and fair to teachers.

To run a high-performing school, you cannot simply Google “best practices.” You have to do the hard work of setting goals based on the needs of each target school, developing strategies and running realistic scenarios to troubleshoot potential problems. The classroom teachers in Providence have done this. We presented a detailed proposal to the district and continually have offered to collaborate on solutions. It’s time for the administration to work with us, not just cherry pick language from our proposal for their patchwork plan.

Yes, we should look at staffing policies for our schools and work together to develop a plan that accounts for experience and other factors. But let’s not stop there. We need to work together on concrete ways to increase student achievement, including providing the resources and tools that teachers need to do their job well and that students need for a quality education.

We need to do all of this, and the best way to do it is to discuss it at the negotiating table together as partners.

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