



Mayor of Providence

Jorge O. Elorza

November 14, 2022

Dear Mayor-elect Smiley,

We write with the belief that the most meaningful difference we could make in our city is to improve the public schools. While we each prioritized education in our own way, and in spite of our efforts to improve them, the reality is that our schools are still falling short. Through these recommendations, we hope to help you avoid common pitfalls and to also urge you to advocate boldly for change. For decades, our kids and families have been yearning for high-quality public schools and it is our hope that over your tenure, our schools will make a dramatic leap towards that goal.

We have heard it said that the out-of-school factor most closely correlated to the success of the student is the socioeconomic status of the mother, and at times, adults in the education system have cast the blame for poor performance on the students. It is true that children in Providence face a myriad of challenges but this can never be allowed as an excuse for the failures of our public schools. We know that our kids can succeed because we have examples throughout the country, and right here in Providence, of how to address these challenges, how to support our students, and how to raise their performance. High-achieving charter schools have shown that all of our kids can excel when they are supported properly. Every student deserves that kind of environment and it is important that our schools have the ability to do what has been proven to work: namely, a longer school day, longer school year, effective teachers and principal autonomy to pick and manage their staff.

We each served as Mayor at different times and under different circumstances. However, the three of us have reached the same conclusion and we speak with one voice on this issue. As such, we felt it was urgent to share our thoughts with you. We deeply appreciate your openness to hearing our feedback and to receiving recommendations from the three of us.

Recommendations:

- 1. Work with PTU to fix the unworkable management structure or push for an “all public charter” system.**

The challenges in the Providence Public School District are structural. The greatest structural challenge of all is the trifecta of the PTU contract, teacher tenure laws, and state arbitration laws. Together, they strip principals and the superintendent of the autonomy and power to act in a broad array of circumstances and they stand in the way of bringing about meaningful change. Most noteworthy is principals' and

superintendents' lack of basic authority to manage their own personnel and to set their own calendar. (Note that this is true regardless of whether RIDE or the City has ultimate oversight of PPSD).

Principals must have the ability to recognize, reward and retain the best teachers while also having the ability to terminate the worst ones. Principals must have the flexibility to shift personnel and resources based on the ever-changing needs of their schools and must be freed from the grievance processes that are overly onerous. In theory, principals do have the power to manage their school's personnel; but in practice, they do not. If principals do not have the ability to truly set the tone and spirit of their buildings, there is no way we can ensure that kids will attend schools that have world-class teachers across the board and we cannot ensure that schools have a world-class culture that inspires kids to succeed.

The "secret sauce" to a great education is no mystery: more learning time with great teachers. As such, the district must have the ability to also determine the length of the school day and the school year. We recommend that you push for these changes so that principals and the superintendent are truly empowered. Once they have the freedom to act, the superintendent can both support principals and hold them accountable to across-the-district high standards. And in turn, you and the school board can support and hold the superintendent accountable to those same high standards.

This structural breakdown, and the unworkable management structure it creates, must be fixed. We recommend that you work in partnership with PTU and jointly find ways to correct the management challenges in a way that gives principals and superintendents the tools they need to turn the district around. These changes are so critical that if you are not able to achieve them, then we recommend that you push to move Providence to an "all public charter" district.

Shifting to an "all public charter" district would empower all principals and school leaders with the flexibility to make the necessary changes. We recognize that charter schools are not a panacea but we also recognize that families cannot and should not have to wait any longer. Each year, parents are voting with their feet and the number of public charter school applications has soared as families recognize that public charter schools offer better options for their kids. We know this is a bold step and we do not make this recommendation lightly. But given what we now know, we would each choose this route and we recommend that you do so as well.

While this approach is bold, we believe it is the best and fairest one. The teachers' union should be brought to the table and given the opportunity to help you change the management structure. If the union is unwilling to change this structural problem, then we strongly recommend that you pursue the "all public charter" route. Our schools require a dramatic change and we recommend that you not settle for anything less.

2. Invest in 21st century school buildings.

It goes without mentioning that our school buildings need a lot of work. We believe you should continue to prioritize city and state bond dollars to make every building not only warm, safe and dry but also flexible and inspiring.

3. Invest in out-of-school learning time.

Research shows that our kids are already behind by the time they start kindergarten and they fall further behind due to summer learning loss. Our families often do not have the means to pay for early learning and summer enrichment programs. We believe every investment in this space is a wise one.

4. Work with key stakeholders and amplify their voices.

In recent years, we've been fortunate to see an increased level of parent advocacy. In addition, Providence is blessed to have a thriving network of youth organizations. We recommend that you find ways to lift up and amplify the voices of families, particularly since many of our key recommendations will require a broad political call for change.


In addition to families, there is an opportunity to include school principals, universities and the business community into advocacy efforts - it will take an all-hands-on-deck approach. Remember that there is a large community in Providence that is hungry for change and is ready to support you in these efforts.

Conclusion


The above recommendations are based on our almost two decades of direct experience overseeing the public schools. We do not focus our recommendations on in-school best practices. That is best left to other education leaders and sources, including the excellent report recently released by RIPEC. Instead, we base our recommendations on what we believe you, as the Mayor, will be in a unique position to accomplish.

We hope the above recommendations help you truly transform public education in our city.


Sincerely,



Jorge O. Elorza
Mayor (2015-2023)



Angel Taveras
Providence Mayor (2011-2015)



Joseph R. Paolino Jr.
Providence Mayor (1984-1991)

CC:

Governor Dan McKee

Commissioner Angélica Infante-Green

Superintendent Javier Montañez