



RHODE ISLAND FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AND HEALTH PROFESSIONALS ^{AFT} AFL - CIO

December 14, 2020

The Honorable Governor Gina M. Raimondo
State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Governor Raimondo:

Back in November 2019, you pledged that education would be the number one priority of your second term. You voiced your commitment to a quality public school education for all Rhode Island students and vowed to “stay the course” to transform Providence schools, saying, “Change is hard. ... I’m not going to turn my back on these kids or on these teachers.”¹

We are writing to ask you to stand by this pledge and urge the state Board of Education’s K-12 Council to table the proposed drastic charter school expansion it is considering on Dec. 15.

This expansion would financially destabilize the Providence school district, because it would drain money from neighborhood public schools. Districts across the country have been driven into terrible financial distress by charter expansion in recent years.² Expanding charters could cost affected Rhode Island districts \$27 million in unrecoverable costs in the 2021-22 school year alone—and a total of \$217 million in lost costs over the next five years.

The damage won’t be *just* to specific districts like Providence and Central Falls. Already, 23.3 percent of proposed new education aid in the state’s FY21 K-12 education budget has been allocated for charters. This expansion would siphon even more money from the traditional public schools that the vast majority of Rhode Island children attend. And for what? Extensive research over the past decades has failed to substantiate any clear charter “advantage.”

The council’s “yes” vote on this expansion would be particularly demoralizing to the Providence community, signaling that the state is giving up—throwing in the towel—on turnaround plans

¹ <https://turnto10.com/i-team/schools-in-crisis/raimondo-education-is-the-number-one-priority-of-second-term>

² <http://schottfoundation.org/blog/2019/02/15/boston-charter-schools-are-pushing-public-education-breaking-point>

Arsen, David et al. 2016. Which Districts Get Into Financial Trouble and Why: Michigan’s Story. Journal of Education Finance.

<https://www.education.msu.edu/epc/library/papers/documents/WP51-Which-Districts-Get-Into-Financial-Trouble-Arsen.pdf>

https://www.inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/ITPI_Breaking_Point_May2018FINAL.pdf

<https://www.lcwlegal.com/news/ab-1505-revises-process-relating-to-the-submission-and-approval-of-charter-petitions>

<http://www.eiaonline.com/MTAThreatReport.pdf>

<https://www.chalkbeat.org/2019/6/11/21108318/critics-of-charter-schools-say-they-re-hurting-school-districts-are-they-right>

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you praised in June 2020 as “meaningful reforms that will better serve students for generations to come.”³ The district and the Providence Teachers Union have been at the bargaining table for months, and the union has offered several detailed proposals aimed at a student-centered, community-centered contract. Taking \$19 million from Providence public schools next school year to unnecessarily expand charter schools would say that the state is no longer committed to this process—and no longer believes in the promise of transformational change in Providence schools or in the leaders you chose to spearhead that change.

This proposed expansion at this moment ignores the COVID-19 pandemic we are still facing, unless of course it’s being advanced to exploit this crisis for a privatization agenda. Rhode Island is facing a \$275 million budget shortfall and a bleak economic forecast for future budget years. It will be a struggle as it is to get children the services and support they’ll need post-pandemic. Yet the council is treating this charter expansion like “business as usual,” ignoring the fact that it will further destabilize schools at a time when stability is the one thing our kids need most. How much more turbulence is the state willing to inflict on students—especially in Providence, which is the primary target of most of these charter proposals? We’ve seen this before, such as in New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina, when a crisis was used to dismantle and privatize a city school system that once answered to the community. We can’t let that happen in Rhode Island.

In the last several months, parents, teachers, administrators and school staff have given their all to help children learn and cope during this horrific pandemic. In Providence, the district opened schools without ensuring crucial safety protections, and yet teachers rose to the occasion. As of Dec. 9, Rhode Island had the highest rate in the country of new COVID-19 infections per capita, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.⁴ Our schools and our state are facing a crisis. This is not the time for the council to try to take much-needed education funds and divert them to charters. That is not the pro-education message from you that made us hopeful in November 2019.

It’s time to reinvest in our children’s future, not give it away to charter operators. Please don’t turn your back on Rhode Island schools and the progress you promised in Providence. Please act immediately and urge the council to reject these charter proposals outright or at least table any further consideration of the proposals until we have more certainty about the real budget implications of this pandemic.

Sincerely,



Randi Weingarten, President
American Federation of Teachers



Francis J. Flynn, President
Rhode Island Federation of
Teachers and Health Professionals

Maribeth Calabro, President
Providence Teachers Union

³ <https://www.golocalprov.com/news/a-year-after-providence-schools-named-among-the-worst-in-the-u.s.-raimondo>

⁴ <https://www.boston.com/news/coronavirus/2020/12/09/rhode-island-coronavirus>