



Enclosure 2b
July 23, 2019

MINUTES OF THE MEETING
June 25, 2019

COUNCIL ON ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Chair McConaghy, welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education. He noted for the record that Member Field would not be joining the meeting, declared a quorum present, and called the meeting to order at 5:31 p.m.

Present: Amy Beretta, Colleen Callahan, Barbara Cottam, Karen Davis, Jo Eva Gaines, *Lauren Griffiths, Marta Martinez, Daniel McConaghy, and Lawrence Purtill

Absent: Gara Field

[*Ex-officio, non-voting member]

1. ACCEPTANCE OF THE AGENDA

On a motion duly made by Lawrence Purtill and seconded by Karen Davis, it was

VOTED: That the Rhode Island Council on Elementary and Secondary Education accepts the agenda for the June 25, 2019, Meeting

Vote: 7 members voted in the affirmative and 0 members voted in the negative as follows:

YEAS: Colleen Callahan, Barbara Cottam, Karen Davis, Jo Eva Gaines, Marta Martinez, Daniel McConaghy, and Lawrence Purtill

NAYS: 0

[Member Beretta arrived after the acceptance of the agenda]

At this time, Chair McConaghy recognized Mary Ann Snider, RIDE’s Deputy Commissioner, who was retiring from State service at the end of the week. He noted her vast accomplishments and her pivotal role in navigating and cultivating strong relationships between the Department and the larger education community.

Next, Chair McConaghy went over the structure of the day’s meeting and explained that the main agenda item was a presentation and discussion of the Johns Hopkins University Report on the Providence Public School System. He announced that as customary, the meeting would start with an Open Forum, followed by a presentation led by Dr. Ashley Berner, Deputy Director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy and Associate Professor of Education, followed by local members of the review team presenting their testimony, and end with questions and discussion amongst the Council.

2. OPEN FORUM

Chair McConaghy announced that no one had signed up to speak.

3. DISCUSSION ITEMS

a. Presentation of Johns Hopkins University Report on the Providence Public School System

Chair McConaghy noted that the only discussion item this evening is the presentation of the Johns Hopkins University report on the Providence School System. He explained that over the past year the Council has been talking about the need to better understand what is happening in the State's lowest performing schools. He noted that as one of her first acts as Commissioner, Angélica Infante-Green, commissioned the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy to lead a review of the Providence School System. The Review was conducted at the joint request of Governor Raimondo and Mayor Jorge Elorza, and included both experts from Johns Hopkins as well as a diverse team of local and national education experts. He explained that this was a holistic review that included school visits, classroom observations, community engagement and forums, and interviews with educators, principals, central office staff and leadership, and other stakeholders who all have a hand in the Providence School System. The Review team was charged to bring back only findings and not make formal recommendations. He stated that this is just a diagnostic, and much like the 2017 Jacobs report on school facilities, it is a look at where things are so we can better understand the problems, and then collectively decide where we need to go.

Next, Chair McConaghy introduced Dr. Berner, Deputy Director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy and Associate Professor of Education, who previously served as the Deputy Director of the CUNY Institute for Education Policy and as the Co-Director of the Education Program at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia.

Dr. Berner began the presentation by sharing that she has a degree from Oxford in Intellectual History, but that she is a classroom teacher at heart. She shared that she has taught little ones, secondary students, and first generation college students, and stressed that what happens in the classrooms and what happens with students is certainly why folks at Johns Hopkins University get up in the morning. Dr. Berner shared that the Institute works with districts and states across the country, including Massachusetts, and studies school systems around the world to examine what works and what doesn't. She noted that the review team was led by Dr. David Steiner,

Executive Director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, supported by eight Institute team members, who were joined by a wonderful team of senior experts and educators from Rhode Island and other states. She stressed that as a Review team, the team sought to reach consensus at the end of everyday about what they saw, what they heard, and were quite careful in the report to note where there was divergence of opinion.

Next, Dr. Berner went over the three research-based indicators of high-performing school systems across the world: A robust and intellectually challenging curriculum (not necessarily a uniform curriculum) for all students that promotes a depth of knowledge that is promoted at the classroom level; school cultures in which the mission is clear, adults and families are aligned, and students can thrive; and governance structures that are nimble and responsive to families' needs. She stressed that when looking at the Providence School District, these three factors were not found. When compared to other similar districts across the country, Providence is not a high-performing district. On the NAEP Assessment, Providence's scores are very similar to those of Baltimore, one of the lowest performing districts in the nation.

Dr. Berner went over the elements of the review:

- Twelve school visits (30% of district schools) and multiple, standards-normed classroom observations in each;
- Interviews and focus groups with parents, almost two-hundred teachers (10% of district teachers), and dozens of students;
- Community panels and conversations with district partners; and
- Interviews with district leaders, including, the Superintendent, Mayor, City Council, School Board, and District Officers.

Next, Dr. Berner went over some direct quotes from parents, community partners, students, School Board members, and former superintendent. She also went over the principal findings of the report and highlighted that every person interviewed noted with gratitude the many devoted teachers, principals, and individual district leaders, who go above and beyond to support student success, appreciation for advanced placement courses, and appreciation for the good things that are happening. However, except for a few, the overwhelming sense from all of the entities is that the good things are overwhelmed by the system itself. There is also an exceptional low-bar for academics in the district as evidenced by the very little student learning witnessed. When interviewing parents, it was apparent time and time again that they were concerned by the lack of academic rigor.

School culture is broken - safety is a daily concern for teachers and students and many of the members of the review team and many district leaders and teachers ended the day in tears. Many school buildings are deteriorating with visible peeling lead paint and leaking sewer pipes. School leaders do not feel set-up for success and many shared frustration with the erroneous hiring practices and referenced the collective bargaining agreement as impeding their ability to exercise leadership and oversight in their schools. Parents also feel marginalized and demoralized by the fact that in some schools there is no bilingual staff.

Next, Dr. Berner briefly went over Providence's academic results and noted that in every grade that is tested there isn't anything above 20 percent proficiency, and that proficiency declines every year and as students get older. When compared with demographically similar districts such as Newark, NJ, and Worcester, MA, Providence experienced a serious drop in ELA proficiency. Also, in the 35 classrooms visited, only two had standards-aligned activities and many classrooms were arranged in a way that only engaged students who faced the teachers, while the non-engaged students were often sitting with desks turned so that they were staring at a wall or sat near the back of the room.

Dr. Berner also highlighted the low expectations for instruction witnessed during the review - student engagement was minimal and in many classrooms, teachers did not press students to engage, resulting in a variety of students off-task behavior, such as checking cell-phones, without teachers being able to do anything about it.

Dr. Berner shared that there is a big disconnect between how the district perceives Summit learning classrooms and the concerns shared by teachers and students alike - off-task behavior, students not engaged with the software in optimal ways, and teachers not engaged with students.

Dr. Berner also went over concerns shared with the Review team on the governance of the district. Individuals with authority consistently reported that there were too many overlapping structures of governance, too many hoops to jump through, and that no one group has the confidence that anyone else is doing it well. The Collective Bargaining Agreement is another area that was emphasized as having negative effects. Numerous school leaders mentioned the hiring and firing practices and how they are forced to hire teachers who they do not feel are qualified. Professional development was another area of concern, with the current contract only allowing one-paid professional development day per school year.

Dr. Berner also emphasized the importance of school culture and how students and teachers in Providence do not feel safe. She noted that research shows that a robust culture in which the mission is aligned to the practices of the institution, doesn't only have an independent and positive effect on academics, but on civic outcomes. Students who are in a coherent school culture have better civil tolerance, better political skills and higher level of community engagement. Another area of concern is the unintended negative consequences that the pressure from the State to reduce student suspensions is having on students and teachers.

In closing, Dr. Berner went over the summary of findings based on the research, direct observations, and interviews:

- Providence has many teachers, principals, district leaders, counselors, specialists, parent liaisons, and community partners who are working tirelessly on behalf of students – everyone is doing their best.
- The great majority of students are not learning on, or even near, grade level and they are losing ground every year - Providence has among the lowest achievement rates of any urban school district in the nation.
- The governance structure is unwieldy, with multiple sources of authority, and with rare exceptions, teachers feel demoralized and unsupported.
- Most parents feel shut out of their children's education.
- Principals find it hard to demonstrate leadership.
- Many school buildings are deteriorating to the point of being dangerous to students' and teachers' wellbeing.

Next, three local members of the Review team shared testimony on their observations during the review process.

Dr. R. Anthony Rolle, Dean of the Allan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies, and Professor of Education Finance and Economic Policy, began his testimony by sharing that his role on the Review team was very specific in considering issues regarding economics, finance, and budget structures within the district. He shared that he expected to hear discussions of providing equitable opportunities, but eventually found no common definition of what equity is, or how equity was actually practiced. He had also expected to hear discussions of fiscal effectiveness and efficiency, but again, without much direction provided by those kind of broad policy aspects, and looking at the budgeting policies and strategies as well. He shared that his team was as thorough as possible, put in very long days, listened to multiple constituents, and he is heartened by the fact that if you look internally, individual departments are actually working fairly well. The main issue, as presented by Dr. Berner, is that there is very

little organizational alignment, very little pursuit of common structure goals, multiple layers of approval to spend over \$5,000, which is not a lot of money in large organizations. He noted that organizational, fiscal and budgetary processes are strong, strategic goals and alignments are weak, but after listening to multiple groups, he does believe that department perspectives are in the right place; wanting organizational improvement and also wanting some direct forms of leadership where the school district can actually have accountability.

Next, Karen Tarasevich, West Warwick Superintendent, shared that although she was assigned to the district team and primarily to the operations and partnerships team, she was also included on the leadership and governance team for some sessions. Her team interviewed district office personnel, including the human capital division, teaching and learning division, special education, English learners, and interviewed the assistant superintendent, teachers, parents, school board members, staff from the Mayor's office, as well as vendors. Amongst all groups interviewed, definite common themes were expressed, both on the successes and challenges of the district. She underlined that it is important to immediately commend the notable common factors that were revealed by all groups interviewed as they all expressed common concerns, passion and commitment to the students, parents and staff of the Providence School Department on the need to provide the best possible educational experience for all. Interviewees were forthcoming in their comments, giving detail and explicit examples to help best deliver their message in discussing both successes and challenges presented by the district. Although definite concerns and challenges were presented, the strength that lies in these common concerns is the simple fact that they are common concerns, beginning with the same goal of strengthening the school department, which will serve as the solid foundation moving forward. She shared that she was impressed by the number of individuals who took the time out of their busy schedules to speak with the review team, which shows the level of importance and concern in helping the school department strengthen its systems. She noted that, at times, some folks became emotional when expressing their experiences, concerns, observations and frustrations. She also shared that she was encouraged by the advancements and the efforts in the Teaching and Learning Division in the recent past, as it was clear that effort and energy created momentum in this branch for the district team in terms of creating a vision, which has begun to create cohesion in the work. She ended by reiterating some of the issues outlined in the earlier presentation in that there is no doubt that the challenges that were commonly expressed by all groups, including frustration with the procurement process, the many layers of the approval process, communication, parent and community engagement, clearly defined district priorities, standard-aligned curriculum that is supported by appropriate resources, and adequate professional development to ensure implementation. Parents presented heartfelt concerns for

their children's education and their future. A large group of business partners were eager to offer their support to the school department. They expressed frustration with access to offer their partnership. Comments concerning school culture and morale were particularly noted in many interviews. It was apparent that there is a lack of communication, availability of curriculum and resources, professional development, and support to teachers in the classroom regarding discipline. Vendors expressed positive experiences with the district and offered thoughtful innovative suggestions for building an even stronger partnership. Superintendent Tarasevich ended her remarks by expressing that the challenges to the state, district and city, is around how to address all of the above and how the necessary systems need to be aligned to address all of the issues. It was crystal clear to her through all of the interviews that there is a need, desire, commitment, and will, to develop a stronger school department. Therefore, there must be a way to help the Providence School Department for the students, staff, and the community. If there is a will, there will be a way.

Lastly, Ramona Santos-Torres, parent of a middle school student in the Providence School System, a member of the Review Team, a parent advocate, and one of the co-founders of Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE), shared her experiences as part of the Review Team. She indicated that she was part of the team that conducted site visits at the middle and high schools, and also helped facilitate some of the sessions for the community forums. She expressed that she thought a lot about what to say that would accurately describe this experience and do it justice, but realized that a page, two, or three, would not do. Because of her experiences as a parent of a student with disabilities and having to fight very hard for her child to receive the most basic services, and because of her previous work experience as an educational specialist in Rhode Island, she thought that she was ready to be part of the review and that nothing would surprise her, but that was not the case. She expressed that right from the get-go, it became apparent that it was going to be a difficult week and that during her own parent interview, she broke down crying as she wasn't emotionally prepared to see children in the kinds of environments that she saw, as those environments are not conducive to learning and do not nurture the amazing qualities that they possess. She shared for example, that she visited a classroom where 24 English language learners with different levels of English proficiency were being taught by a single teacher. Some students shared a painful story about a teacher using inappropriate and racist language in the classroom, which should not be allowed. She also heard the plea from many educators for more resources, particularly for multi-language learners. She ended her testimony by expressing that anyone that has decision-making authority over education who reads this report, does not sleep, is disturbed, angry, sad, has no rest, no peace, as these are children that have been failed by all. We cannot stop until we have created an education environment that our children deserve. It is everyone's obligation to do whatever it takes and that she believes that everyone will work together to better the education system in Providence and in Rhode Island.

At this time, Chair McConaghy thanked the three members of the Review team for their testimony, acknowledged other members of the Review team who were at the meeting for their time and commitment, and asked Dr. Berner to join the table to answer questions from Council Members about the process and findings of the review.

Council Member Purtill asked Dr. Berner if she sees the school culture and suspension issue as a growing trend around the country and how it is being addressed, and whether she got a sense from the teachers and principals of the kind of professional development support that they are seeking.

Dr. Berner responded that school culture is definitely a growing concern around the country and that many school systems have used school culture surveys, restorative practices, parental engagement tools, and many other efforts, which lead to civic and academic outcomes; but it requires a lot of support. As far as professional development, teachers and principals were visibly upset that a coherent curriculum does not exist, especially given the high student mobility in Providence. Other issues that came up included not having enough or adequate resources and time allocated for teachers to deliver instruction, and the lack of equity. She also acknowledged that many students are aware of how under challenged they are and which schools are underfunded and lack the resources and programs.

Council Member Beretta thanked everyone who put in the time and expressed that based on their efforts she hopes that everyone puts the kids and families first and comes together as a State to do what needs to be done.

Council Member Gaines expressed that she was frustrated when reading the report her first reaction was one of disappointment and now she is feeling anger because everyone has known about these conditions in Providence for years and we as adults have failed our kids. The future of our kids is at stake and the time to take action is now.

Council Member Davis expressed that she too felt very emotional when reading the report and voiced that the good news is that hopefully this is the worst day and that the best days are ahead for our children.

Next, Commissioner Infante-Green, shared her reactions to the report. She began by expressing that she has read the report six times and that each time she has gone through different waves of emotion. She expressed that this is the most heart-breaking report that she has ever read, and that leading up to today's meeting, she heard every adult worried about fingers being pointed at them. How dare we, she said, have allowed this to happen for so long? Own it, because if you cannot change it, own it. She vowed that as she works with everyone, she will call people out.

Everyone that she has spoken to says that they are not surprised. Where have you been? As a mother, this is not okay, and this is not okay for any kid. As she visited schools, she was hoping that it wasn't going to be what is in the report, but unfortunately, it is. She walked into 12 classrooms in one school and did not see teaching in one, and that is not okay. She walked into a school where she was left standing there for five to ten minutes because they did not know who she was. She voiced that as a community, she does hear outrage. She stressed that everyone plays a part in this and she is not moving her family here to be silent and that anyone that is not willing to make the change, is part of the problem. She isn't here to point fingers. This is a broken system from top to bottom, so everyone has responsibility; own it and change it, because that is what our kids and families deserve. There is a culture of oppression and as she goes through these waves of emotion, today she is angry, and at the end of the day, she is determined to change it. We either lock arms and do it together, or you will be left behind; because this will change.

At this time Board Chair Cottam expressed that as she read the report she wrote down notes about how she felt. First and foremost, collectively, we have failed our young people through a decade's long cycle, we have failed our families, and we have failed our State. We all feel sick, and to say that we are outraged, disturbed, horrified, and sad, at the findings, would be an understatement. It is unconscionable that our students have had to endure this. Clearly we have a system in crisis; the system is completely broken. As a result of that, good people are trapped in overly beauracritic governance structures with dysfunctional school cultures, low expectations about everything, lack of critical support for our teachers, parents, low-levels of academic instruction, all as a result of a broken system, and this is unacceptable. Moving forward, it's imperative that students are at the center of all of our decisions as they need to trust that school is a place where they can go to grow, learn, and rely on their educators and their peers, and that clearly is not the case. The current system as reflected in this report shows that productive learning environments are a rarity, which is unacceptable. We must act with a sense of urgency for the betterment of the lives of each child in our Providence schools. To my fellow Council Members and every constituency represented, no action would be a dereliction of our duty.

Council Member Martinez stated that it was very shocking to read of the lack of support to the English language learners - our immigrants, our newcomers, individuals who come with hope and who moved here because they wanted their children to have a strong future and a good education, and that they are being ignored - they enter with high hopes and they do not receive any kind of education. She is hopeful that with this report and with everything that she has heard today, that we are going to lock arms and become a welcoming community for everyone.

Council Member Callahan expressed that as terrible as the report is, it is a hopeful sign. She echoed Chair Cottam's comment in that to do nothing, would be a dereliction of duty. She stated that she thinks about those children, about those families, and those individuals who work in the schools described in the report, and that in this broken system there is enough blame to go around. There are enough issues, that each issue is almost like a domino that affects the other issues. Teaching and learning conditions in this city are beyond deplorable and the conditions that our kids and families in Providence need and deserve, and the places that teachers and leaders need to also feel welcome and be able to do their job and feel that they are supported, need to be addressed. Those of us who work with folks in Providence, unfortunately have known that there were some things that needed to be addressed, and this report gets to the level of dysfunction that we are facing. Sleepless nights and everyone around the table and around the room has something to contribute - expertise, resources, and ideas, and that is what we need to do. She stressed that we have to move forward, get beyond the finger pointing, and figure out what everyone can bring to the table. Whether it's the Council or organizations that Council members represent, everyone needs to get together and move forward, yesterday.

In closing, Chair Cottam expressed that today's meeting has been challenging and sobering. She thanked Johns Hopkins University, the Review team, and everyone who spoke up and participated, and shared her expectations for continued participation. She reiterated that the report is just a starting point for our work collectively together, and asked that each Council member attend at least one of the eight public forums that have been scheduled over the next few weeks. These forums will give the Commissioner, RIDE and everyone the opportunity to hear directly from the Providence community, teachers, parents, students, and community leaders, for positive change for Providence. She encouraged everyone present to attend the forums, which will help inform future decisions regarding the report, as we need to act with urgency. She asked that the Commissioner come back to the Council with recommended action this Summer as the future of our children and of our State depend on us. We need to move swiftly and with urgency.

6. ADJOURNMENT: Meeting adjourned at 6:52 p.m.

On a motion duly made by Colleen Callahan and seconded by Jo Eva Gaines, it was

VOTED: That the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education adjourns.

Vote: 8 members voted in the affirmative and 0 members voted in the negative as follows:

Amy Beretta, Colleen Callahan, Barbara Cottam, Karen Davis,
Jo Eva Gaines, Marta Martinez, Daniel McConaghy, and
Lawrence Purtil

YEAS: 8

NAYS: 0