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Honorable Robert Duffy
Mayor City of Rochester
City Hall
3rd Floor, Room 301-A
30 Church Street
Rochester, New York 14614

Honorable Gladys Santiago
President City Council
City Hall
3rd Floor, Room 307-A
30 Church Street
Rochester, New York 14614

Dear Bob and Gladys:

I'm writing this letter to the both of you as a friend; resident of the City of Rochester; the proud parent of two City School District graduates; and finally as a Board member. My experiences as a parent, resident, and Board member tell me (particularly given the unprecedented progress this District has made within the last two years) that our community would not benefit from instituting any form of mayoral control.¹

Having said that, I do believe there are areas in which, together, we can work to improve how we serve the children, parents, and citizens of this community. For example, it has been fairly argued by some that the District has not, historically, provided the kind of financial stewardship that the citizens of this community deserve.

Accordingly, I maintain that we can improve upon our role, as fiduciary agents, by working more collaboratively with City Hall throughout the course of the entire year through our committee structure. Consequently, in a recent communication to fellow Board members, I

¹ I am proud to say that I have not let my opinions regarding Mayoral Control, get in the way of encouraging dialogue (and yes even debate) on this important topic. Accordingly, I arranged to have Professor Joseph Viteritti (on the Bob Smith Show) and Professor Frederick Hess (on WDK's popular Water cooler program) last week. Both of these individuals are recognized experts on the subject of school governance. I believe their presentations were balanced and informative. Please let me know if you missed either show. I will arrange to get you a recording. Unfortunately, the "Community Conversation on Mayoral Control" which was to take place at Colgate Divinity was cancelled last week due to the weather. We are attempting to reschedule that event. Of course, your presence at that event is welcome. I will let you know as soon as we have another date for that event.

suggested the following:

Appoint, pursuant to Section 2116-c of New York State's Education Law, a member of Council's or Mayor's Auditing Staff, to The Board of Education's Audit Committee.

As you both may know, Section 2116-c Subdivision 2 of New York State's Education Law provides that a Board of Education may appoint "persons other than... members of the board... [if] such membership is advisable to provide accounting and auditing expertise." This Committee is currently Chaired by Commissioner Allan Williams. Commissioner Willa Powell and I also serve on this Committee. The Board has never appointed a person "outside" of the Board to join this committee. However, given the language of the statute, I see no reason why the Board should not invite someone from the Mayor's Cabinet or City Council (or its designee) to join this important committee.

In fact, the Audit Committee is currently considering applications for this appointment(s). Accordingly, no official action, by the full Board, is required to make this recommendation a reality. In fact, the Audit Committee will be meeting shortly to review the resumes and CVs of persons who have expressed an interest in serving on the Audit Committee. Therefore, please forward any nominations you may have to me, Commissioner Williams, or Commissioner Powell.

Amend Board Bylaws to Allow for the Appointment of a Member of the City's Finance Department to the Board's Finance Committee

The Board of Education has five Committees: (i) Audit; (ii) Community and Intergovernmental Relations; (iii) Policy; (iv) Excellence In Student Achievement; (v) Governance; and (vi) Finance. The Finance Committee exist to: (a) facilitate board involvement in the development of the District's annual budget; (b) facilitate annual review of the Superintendent's recommended budget; (c) develop annual budget timeline; (d) receive and review regular reports on the District's financial position; (e) receive, review, and provide recommendation to Board on resolutions for Board consideration; (f) recommend budget/finance policies to the Board for its adoption; (g) review of comprehensive annual financial report and management letter.

Given the sweeping charge of this committee and its impact on the District's financial affairs, the absence of City input at this level must be seen as unacceptable. Even with Commissioner Willa Powell's able leadership, the Finance Committee (without year around conversations between City leaders and staff) cannot be expected to comprehensively understand all of the City's concerns.² Nor (without regular conversations with the District's financial staff and leaders) can the City leaders fully appreciate the budgetary, contractual, and practical constraints which the District must operate under.³

Accordingly, at our next Board meeting, I will forward this proposal to the Finance Committee and Committee for Intergovernmental Relations. It would be my proposal that this committee member have full voting privileges and not just be an advisory member. Hopefully, they will see the merit of this proposal and recommend it to the full Board for its approval.

In addition to the above recommendations, I am also going to humbly suggest that Council

² As you know, the City Charter requires that the Board transmits its budget to the City Hall no later than May 8, 2009. The Charter also requires that the Council act on the budget estimate by convening a budget hearing no later than June 9, 2009. City Council must act on that budget estimate no later than June 16, 2009. This short window leaves no real time for a comprehensive review of the District's budget.

³ Presently Commissioner Powell and I are assigned to this Committee. The parent representative to the Finance is Felix Jacobs. My understanding is that Mr. Jacobs is a C.P.A.

consider reassessing whether its present Committee structure lends itself to giving educational issues the type of attention that they truly deserve. Believing that it does not, I am respectfully proposing the following:

That Rochester City Council Create an Education Committee

While the inviting City Hall staff and leaders to join our Audit and Finance Committees most certainly will improve the coordination and cooperation on a host of financial issues, it will do nothing to improve the myriad of other issues which we must address, collectively, if we are to improve our City. Quite honestly, long before our meeting on January 12th meeting, we struggled, as leaders, to work cooperatively and effectively on a wide variety of issues that impact the citizens of this community – e.g. truancy and curfew are the most obvious examples that come to my mind.

While individual Council members are certainly well versed on the challenges of our District, City Council's present Committee structure doesn't appear to lend itself to regular and systemic conversations about education -- certainly not in the exclusive manner that the subject matter requires and deserves.

No doubt you all have occasional conversations about our schools during discussions at Finance; Economic Development and the Environment; Neighborhood and Community Development; Parks and Public Works; and Public Safety and Recreation meetings. However, by creating an Education Committee (empanelled with at least one Board Member and a Cabinet ranking official from Central Office), Council could ensure year round discussions and cooperation by Council and the Board.

Conclusion

Much has been said about the opportunity that was missed at our meeting on January 12, 2009. Personally, I believe that our discussions, on the 12th, created an opportunity for each of us, as leaders, to, more fully, examine and explore the wide variety of solutions which can positively impact our community and our schools.

While we may ultimately stake out different positions on whether mayoral control is needed in this community, I see no reason why we cannot find common ground on the proposals I have outlined above. I hope you both agree and I look forward to your response to each of these proposals.

Respectfully,



Van Henri White

cc.

Board of Education

City Council

Jean Claude Brizard