



The Providence Teachers Union’s Initial Recommendations and Commitments for Rebuilding Providence Public Schools

The Providence Teachers Union represents almost 2,000 teachers and substitutes in the Providence public schools. We have been fighting for the conditions we need to teach and students need to learn for decades.

After so many changes of administration, crumbling school buildings, and lack of resources to support the instructional climate and well-being of our students and staff, we are heartened by the state’s commitment to the students who attend Providence public schools and their families and to partnering with the PTU in finding solutions to the serious concerns we all share.

For far too long, we have been told by management that the PTU “does not represent students.” We have regularly brought innovative and creative ideas regarding professional development, curriculum needs, hiring practices and teacher leadership pathways to the negotiation table only to be told: “You negotiate benefits, salary and working conditions; stay in your lane. *And while we may disagree with some aspects of what has transpired in the last two months, let’s be crystal clear: The PTU—after extensive review of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy’s report on the Providence Public School District, and after participating in all the listening sessions held by Rhode Island Department of Education Commissioner Angélica Infante-Green—is committed to partnering with the state to improve Providence Public Schools for all children.*

Moving our schools forward: Guiding principles for the state plan

Our union was built on the principle that *all* children deserve a high-quality education in a safe, healthy and welcoming environment. *All* children deserve schools that teach and nurture them so they have the opportunity to live fulfilling lives. *All* families and communities deserve public schools that reflect their voice, their input and their dreams for their children.

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That is what public education is at its best—a ladder of opportunity, a path out of poverty, and a place where we both embrace diversity and promote common goals for the public good. *This is the vision that inspires teachers to become teachers, and it's the vision our union was born from.*

But the conditions and challenges that have existed for decades in Providence public schools fall far short of that vision. *No one knows that more than teachers do.* In 1993, when the “Providence Blueprint for Education” study first raised the alarm about the quality and crumbling infrastructure of our city’s schools, the Providence Teachers Union was already calling for action on and investment in our schools.

Like Commissioner Infante-Green, we educators have been saddened and outraged by the inaction and lack of resources of the past decades. We teach and work in these conditions every day, and we see the cost to our students.

We are heartened that the state of Rhode Island is stepping up. We believe that the momentum finally exists for real change and real progress. Our union at every level (local, state and national) is fully committed to partnering with our state, our district and our community in this effort. We are “all in.” That said, teachers across the country have too often seen state and district “reform” plans promise much, then founder. We don’t want that to happen in Providence. We want to build on this momentum, not sit and wait for others, and in that spirit, we outline several steps we believe can help strengthen our public schools in Providence, as early as this September, as schools reopen. We believe any plan must first incorporate a few overarching principles:

1) *The spirit and the structure of any state plan must recognize that teachers and school staff are part of the solution, not a problem to be overcome.* Teachers’ teaching conditions and students’ learning conditions are one and the same. Teachers want what our students need. If the wholehearted goodwill, dedication and commitment of teachers is honored as a “given” in the state plan, that will go far toward making it a success. Unfortunately, we have already seen some wonderful teachers quit this summer, wondering whether they have a place in the Providence schools.

2) *Changes and improvement should be done with teachers, not to teachers.* To put it bluntly, we want to be at the table and not on the menu when decisions are made and ideas are brainstormed. We have so much to offer, from firsthand experience in our classrooms and schools, to a wealth of professional development offerings and resources our state and national unions can provide, to a strong track record in developing and implementing the proven community schools approach. We are asking the state and district to trust teachers and ask us what we need to do our

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jobs. We are asking you to empower real teacher voice and agency and the freedom to teach.

3) *Likewise, change should happen with a broad range of partners, first and foremost families and our community. Every stakeholder has a valuable role to play.* Moving our schools forward will mean welcoming and heeding the involvement and input of all stakeholders: students, families, community groups, social justice advocates, teachers and school staff, district and state leaders, and a range of experts in education and student well-being. As we know only too well from disastrous top-down reform regimes in other cities, the path to success depends on this kind of inclusiveness. The PTU, the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, and the American Federation of Teachers want to work with every possible partner to help create the schools that Providence students need and deserve. We want the students and families of Providence to feel that their schools belong to them, not to the district, the state or a faceless reform effort.

4) *While teachers and our union have much to contribute and a great eagerness to contribute it, the state of Rhode Island has the ultimate responsibility for the success of this plan.* Our union at every level wants to offer the expertise and resources that are in our “wheelhouse.” For example, the national AFT could assist in the implementation of a community schools approach by lending our staff and partner experts to this effort and through our AFT Innovation Fund. We can assist and participate in countless other ways. But the state must commit for the long term. What does this mean? It means the state must be willing to convene and lead a broad partnership. It means the state must be committed to approaches and strategies that are thoughtful and proven—not rehashes of reform fixes that have failed elsewhere. It means that the state must be willing to truly invest the resources it will take to fix our crumbling school buildings. It means that the state must be willing to invest in the staff and resources we know can work, from hiring more guidance counselors to funding urgently needed wraparound services.

Teachers are relieved and excited to see that the change and progress we have so long called for is finally beginning to happen. The PTU is not only committed but “chomping at the bit” to work with all stakeholders to address the many issues facing our school system. What we want for Providence is what our union has always been all about: We want to ensure that all our children receive the high-quality education they deserve in our public schools, and that our teachers have the freedom, support and resources to teach at their best. That work must begin today.

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Specific recommendations:

Taking to heart the state's invitation to serve as a partner in addressing the issues identified in the Johns Hopkins report, the PTU has identified a set of priorities, desired outcomes and action steps to incorporate into the district-state intervention plan. We understand that the work to be done requires true partnership, with all voices, ideas and opinions valued and considered. To that end, the following is a list of some of the steps the PTU believes can bring about the changes in behaviors, ideas and relationships necessary to ensure the high-quality school system that the students, educators, families and all members of the Providence Public Schools community want and deserve.

While this is not an exhaustive list of the necessary steps to take and investments to make in our schools, the list below reflects the areas in which the PTU can offer effective and extensive help, and can and should play a lead role:

1. Developing behavioral norms for our schools

In collaboration with the state, the district, administrators, teachers, parents and students, we should develop a set of behavioral norms for all who enter our school buildings, and we should identify appropriate responses to behaviors not within those agreed-upon norms. Hospitals, places of worship, workplaces and stadiums all have behavioral norms and expectations. Developing such norms for our schools would bring them in line with these other venues and would create a safe learning and working environment. The PTU proposes convening the above-mentioned partners prior to the opening of the 2019-20 school year to begin this work.

2. Offering a union-sponsored professional development series

Recognizing the need for increased professional development related to working with students and families in a diverse, urban environment, the PTU, in partnership with the Providence Children and Youth Cabinet, will offer workshops for teachers and administrators on topics such as Trauma 101, Historical Trauma, De-escalation in the Classroom, Self-Care for Teachers/Administrators, Grief and Separation, and Mindfulness with Dr. Richard Booth. While these will provide value on a stand-alone basis, they will be considered as part of an overall PD plan in collaboration with the state and the district.

The PTU will also partner with the AFT and the RIFTHP to offer additional, ongoing professional development in these and other critical areas, such as support for English language learners, and content-related instructional strategies to increase academic rigor at all levels. The PTU will look to the many successful examples of union-management collaboration on systemic improvements to PD within Rhode Island and across the country in proposing a comprehensive professional learning system for Providence.

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3. Increasing communication with community partners, families and students

PTU leaders and members are committed to engaging with the community, families and students on a regular basis. The PTU will meet with stakeholders at least on a monthly basis to answer questions, have discussions or address concerns. We are committed to building new relationships as well as strengthening existing ones.

4. Addressing cultural competency, bias and racism

The PTU acknowledges that systemic and institutional racism exists and wants to be part of the process in addressing ways to have difficult, yet necessary, conversations that lead to meaningful change. We want to be part of the conversation that helps to choose culturally accurate, relevant and meaningful curriculum.

We want to bring our community partners into our schools as leaders, teachers and resources—not, for example, as an add-on to Black History month, or a guest lecturer, or a helper after crisis and bloodshed, but as part of the fabric that is our school community. The PTU proposes to convene a work group, facilitated by experts in the field, to begin this conversation as soon as possible.

5. Addressing chronic absenteeism

A qualified teacher in every classroom is vital for successful learning. The PTU understands the importance of having a certified teacher in the classroom every day. But we hope the state’s plan will also recognize the impact of continuing acute stress on teacher health and chronic disease, as borne out by research. Nearly half of teachers nationwide report experiencing high stress daily, and we believe the numbers are higher for teachers in Providence, given the current conditions under which teachers teach and students learn. So on one hand, we know that the conditions in schools have had a terrible effect on students as well as staff. But at the same time, we understand that teacher absences have been a problem. If a teacher has established patterns of absences (for example, Monday-Friday, or days before or after vacations) not attributable to mental/physical health conditions, this must be addressed. In these cases, in accordance with the language of the current Collective Bargaining Agreement, the district, through the Human Resources office, can and should follow appropriate statutory personnel procedures. The PTU is committed to working with the district to enforce this provision of the CBA.

6. Expanding partnerships for diversity

The RIFTHP, the PTU and the district are committed to growing partnerships with colleges and universities, to expanding on established relationships, and to designing and developing systems and programs to assist Providence in recruiting and retaining educators

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of color. The PTU calls for continuing involvement in the current RIFTHP-led statewide development of a RI Pathway to Teaching based on the Educators Rising curriculum, incorporating that program in the current Mount Pleasant High School Teacher Academy and piloting it in other Providence high schools.

In addition, we call for:

Adopting K-12 social justice standards

The PTU calls for the adoption of social justice standards from Teaching Tolerance (tolerance.org) and providing the professional development necessary to incorporate them into current practice and civics education curriculums in all high schools.

Increasing counselors and improving K-12 social-emotional support systems

Our children need social and emotional support at a level and to an extent never seen before. We need to make a concerted, collective effort to support our students in our schools with regard to their social-emotional well-being. The PTU calls upon the district and the state to immediately increase the number of counselors at our elementary, middle and high schools.

Developing community schools

Research shows that full-service community schools meet a wide range of student needs, engage families and community partners, and lead to increases in attendance and achievement. The Providence Teachers Union strongly suggests piloting a community schools program similar to the program at Agnes Little Elementary School, a nationally recognized community school in Pawtucket, R.I. The national AFT could assist in the implementation of a community schools approach by lending staff and partner experts to this effort and through our AFT Innovation Fund. We have a model, we have the will, we have many options, and we believe we can and should make this happen.

Conclusion

Much additional work needs to be done. The city must make fixing the condition of our schools an immediate priority. We must work together to ensure that our evaluation system and Peer Assistance and Review system provide teachers with effective feedback on their practice, professional development and support, and that appropriate statutory personnel procedures are followed when necessary.

The PTU is committed to working with all stakeholders to address the many issues facing our school system to ensure that all our children receive the high-quality education they deserve in our Providence public schools. Again, that work must begin today.

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