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Achieve Hartford! Comments for 4.19.11 – Board of Education Public Hearing

Good evening, Board members, Dr. Adamowski and Dr. Kishimoto As you know, I am Jim Starr, Executive Director of Achieve Hartford! at 221 Main Street, Hartford.

First, we would like to acknowledge the District for developing a workable 2011/2012 budget in this very tough budget year for school districts across the state.

While indeed including some staff reductions, this initial submission finds ways to reduce spending without new, net teacher layoffs, to try and minimize the impact on classrooms. For sure, in this economy, this is a difficult and important outcome.

Several recommendations outlined by the Board-appointed Budget Task Force became part of your deliberations last week – and perhaps, with more lead time, other recommendations can make a difference, too.

At the same time, the 11 million dollars in federal stimulus funds that will plug a giant hole this year, will not be there next year. As relieved as we are today, we will be even harder pressed next year at this time ... when contractual personnel increases and other fixed costs again escalate. In fact, absent new revenue sources, all signs point to an even greater budget shortfall for the 2012-2013 school year.

Just as student improvement and reform requires long-range planning, it is not too soon to begin anticipating the 2012/2013 school year and its financial challenges. Decisions made – and precedents established – this year will certainly have an impact next year.

Consistent with the dialogue as part of the Budget Task Force presentation, Achieve Hartford! urges the District to consider and convene – as early as the summer or early September – a new Task Force to begin to innovatively address the looming financial challenges for the year 2013.

Doing so early in the process will allow you to more fully air and address the structural problems of 2012 and the many, hard decisions that surely will be required again.

All that said, before recommending the 2011/2012 budget to the City, there is much still to discuss, both in terms of the important questions raised tonight by Board members individually, and by constituents.

We also would like to raise a few immediate questions – on the budget before you – that should be addressed in your trade-off discussions to help evaluate the impact on student learning:

1. Individual School Staffing

- Considering the numbers of position movements in each school and given a net no-change in teaching positions, where will teachers be placed throughout the District after the Weaver senior class graduates?
- How will support for English Language Learners or special education students increase or decrease in schools?
- How will learning be impacted – and where – by the proposed reductions of 27 paraprofessional positions?

2. Transportation

- Given the indicated reductions in transportation expenses, will students be subject to the same transportation rules of the past two years?

3. Central Office

- How will decreased central office staff affect both the support individual schools receive – and student achievement?
- Will District communications efforts and objectives be enhanced?
- Are investments in Family Engagement being maintained – or possibly enhanced?

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Again, hard decisions must be made by this Board as you adopt your budget. With the trade-offs that you must consider in this difficult financial environment, the impact on student achievement must be minimized to keep the momentum of reform on track.

Thank you.