



## **Comments from Jim Starr, Executive Director, Achieve Hartford! - April 20 Board of Education Budget meeting**

Good evening Madame Chair, Mayor Perez, and Board members and Superintendent Adamowski. My name is Jim Starr and I am the Executive Director of Achieve Hartford!, 221 Main Street in Hartford.

To be sure, the budget being discussed among you and community tonight is a difficult one. These unprecedented economic times are again requiring a budget that includes a meaningful reduction in staff - over 90 FTEs, including nearly 50 teachers; operating expense reductions that impact school supplies, utilities, and support personnel; and transportation reconfigurations that impact students on a daily basis. This, of course, is prior to any potential impacts from the recommended \$2.5 million recommended lower funding from the City announced Monday.

The continued success of the reform efforts underway will be significantly impacted by the budget discussions and decisions ahead of you. Tonight, as you begin to receive public input on the budget, we want to emphasize three themes that will be important to those deliberations.

First, **results matter and we are seeing them.** Public data and Achieve Hartford! research has shown several things: two years of overall improving school performance; reading score improvement at all levels – an absolute key measure; improvement in neighborhood school performance at rates nearly three times that of magnet schools; and rising graduation rates coupled with a commitment to improved standards. While we are not denying the complexity, we strongly encourage you to not to lose focus on the fact that reform actions you have taken so far are working. As you look to the 2010/2011 school year, keep in mind results from the past two years. Your executed vision is showing signs of progress and the achievement gap is showing evidence of closing. Creative thinking and candid discussions - with an unwavering focus on the students - will be essential.

Secondly, with a more forward view, show fidelity to your Strategic Operating Plan. It is a well thought out document. Since it was established and adopted largely before the full impact of the current financial environment was known, tweaks may be necessary; but we strongly urge you to let it **continue to be your guide.** Key items like student based budgeting, commitments to effective teaching and strong school leaders, strong theme based small schools, and effective parent and community engagement and collaboration are all addressed in the Plan and must be carried out to the extent possible. Tradeoffs due to budget constraints are likely, but sustainability of improving schools is dependent upon continued delivery of key aspects of the plan. Do not consider going backwards.

Third, we were pleased to see the evidence that School Governance Council and their leadership signed off on the budget submissions. We noted that 27 of the 28 operating SGC's provided documentation of their sign off, and we are hopeful that all members actively participated in the budget development. While still young, the School Governance Councils are an excellent means of effective communications by allowing parents and the community to understand and provide input to the tradeoffs necessary in this difficult financial environment.

To maintain this effective communication means, we strongly encourage the Board and District to have Principals include adequate SGC training resources in each school's budget so that appropriate contributions can continue to be made by each council. Such resources do not need to be much, but they are essential to carry out autonomous school objectives. Moreover, effective participation by the parental community via School Governance Councils is most important to maintaining the culture of community accountability and commitment.

The budget presented to you tonight does not have the resources necessary to address all needs of the District, but the District can continue to move forward if your core beliefs are adhered to. Keep the dialogue candid and keep the ideals and mechanics of the working reform in your discussion.

Thank you