

## **Jim Starr, Comments to the Hartford Board of Education – 3/16/10**

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

As a result of reform efforts adopted by this Board, Hartford Schools have improved over the last 2 school years, with student achievement rising at a rate faster than any other school district in CT. Together with the Board's vision, there has been inspired school leadership, effective classroom instruction from our teachers, and increased engagement from Parents. Indeed, all stakeholders of education in Hartford have a lot to be proud of.

However, while improving, Hartford's situation is extreme in that it remains a chronically low performing school district, and the current fiscal crisis that has already forced the elimination of so many teachers and staff is about to get much, much worse.

In spite of this very tough situation, we cannot risk going backwards. Instead, we must give the recent gains we have seen the greatest chance for sustained progress. It is with this in mind that I wish to address the proposal before you requesting state intervention.

You have clearly articulated in your Strategic Operating Plan a statement of "Purpose, Core Beliefs and Commitments". To quote the plan: " To significantly improve the performance of Hartford students, we the members of the Hartford Public Schools Board of Education commit ourselves to fundamental restructuring and reform of the Hartford school district...Our core business is teaching and learning; therefore, we exist to support the relationship between the teacher and the student."

It is the relationship between the teacher and student that is most important here. And because teachers are the main drivers of student achievement, and Hartford is now seeing results, we must do all that we can to keep the trained teachers we have invested in at their schools. If we can devise a system that better facilitates keeping theme-trained teachers at the very schools where positive results are being seen, that is a good thing.

For successful sustained reform, staffing expertise and reform goals should be aligned. It is our belief that District-wide based seniority is not aligned with a smaller school, theme based academy approach – the very model you have adopted that has demonstrated success. Just like teacher accountability cannot be expected without ongoing relevant professional development and defined expectations, school performance accountability in these schools cannot be expected with the constant potential of disruption from "bumping" of specialty trained teachers. It is counter intuitive to the reform adopted.

To be sure, the proposal before you tonight is not ordinary and would be best implemented with timely buy-in from all stakeholders. But, unfortunately, we are not in ordinary times. When chronic situations like Hartford's are present -- both financially and academically - difficult acts may, at times, be necessary. All successful organizations must adapt and change in extreme situations.

Effective school change is rooted in good research. In Hartford, two research facts are indisputable: First, since the mid 90's, we have had years of relatively flat or declining school performance. Second, in the last two school years, we have had evidence that reforms adopted by this Board have improved student achievement. The research is compelling that the status quo does not work. New ideas that have shown signs of success must be tried – we have seen them in New Haven and at CREC.

Options that are proffered to keep the success we've seen over the last two years going – like school based seniority - should be pursued as they are needed to fundamentally change - indeed consistent with the Core Beliefs you have committed to in your Strategic Operating Plan.