



First Annual Achieve Hartford! Open Letter to the Superintendent and Hartford School Community

In Our Mutual Interest of School Improvement

July 22, 2014

As we welcome Dr. Beth Schiavino-Narvaez as Hartford's new school superintendent, we applaud her intensive effort, through her transition team, to assess the educational needs of all Hartford students and directly confront the unacceptable performance variances between schools situated right down the street from each other.

It is an exciting time: With an honest assessment of educational shortfalls, pitfalls, and possibilities, Hartford will be poised to bolster the college, workforce, and citizenship opportunities for thousands of children. We cannot fail to take advantage of this fresh start.

In the past seven years, Hartford has reinvigorated school improvement, developing dozens of significant, community-wide and institutional commitments to improve schools, powered by partnerships. One of them is with Achieve Hartford! As a nonprofit organization supportive but independent of the District, we have played the role of critical friend since we were founded in 2008.

In that spirit, today we issue this open letter to the superintendent and community, knowing that *we all must do more to help realize the vision of high-quality schools for all Hartford children.*

The individual and municipal economic stakes could not be higher.

Where We Are

Hartford is not alone: Every metro area in the U.S. faces an equity crisis born of stark socioeconomic disparities, town-line housing segregation, and a lagging public trust after years, if not decades, of failure to rejuvenate hard-pressed schools. Yet Hartford has been a leader in crafting an all-choice portfolio of schools, while the State, carrying out its *Sheff v. O'Neill* desegregation responsibility, has made significant inroads with its region-wide magnet school approach.

Speaking for Hartford families: This work is incomplete.



Identifying Priorities and Taking Action

Achieve Hartford! has monitored Hartford Board of Education meetings, conducted numerous projects to both inform and learn from the community, analyzed student performance, student-based budgeting, school choice, school climate and school governance councils, and partnered with numerous organizations and community leaders. From this unique perspective, we believe the District, Board of Education, teacher and other unions, City and State governments, business and community partners, and families together must identify strategic priorities and determine what actions each can take to support education this upcoming year.

In this first annual letter to the Superintendent and community, we suggest four priorities for moving school improvement efforts forward right now, which all stakeholders can rally around:

1. ► Communicating Broadly and Deeply

Leadership at all levels of the community must find more effective ways to share actionable information with one another and their constituents.

Despite the very involved community we have in Hartford, there are so many more ways that partners could be deeply engaged in the work of school improvement. Whether the goal is stronger parent participation on School Governance Councils, more companies providing internships, more support from community leaders for school turnaround efforts, or more agencies aligning resources around 3rd Grade reading, it all starts with communication.

Customized messaging and more community outreach efforts from Hartford Public Schools can stimulate deeper engagement by meeting stakeholders where they are and helping us all remember that most problems in education belong to the entire community. Consistent communication requires not just positive progress reports, but data fully assessing trouble spots – especially for the most intractable education problems such as chronic absenteeism or student readiness to learn.

Armed with solid information, leaders at all levels, from City Council and Board of Education to PTOs and NRZs, must also do their part to help steward Hartford through its most difficult challenges. It can't be the school district's responsibility alone to ensure parent turnout at an important community event or that the faith-based community understands what college readiness and degree completion require. Greater communication must permeate throughout the entire community, and we look forward to adding value in this effort.

2. ► Building Trusting Relationships

Relationships among Hartford leaders must foster a culture that taps and mobilizes the full resources of the community.

True partnerships, meeting both or all engaged parties' needs and interests, require strong relationships. These start with good communication, but require continuing one-to-one interaction between key leaders in our small city.

Going beyond any one leader, this constellation of education advocacy relationships extends to key people in the business, faith-based, parent, non-profit, union, government and philanthropic communities. In cities that have avoided the traps of special-interest factions and successfully advanced social change, relationships have been the key.

It is easy to recognize the need for the superintendent to have a strong relationship with the Mayor, local CEO, or foundation president – but no less crucial for all to have relationships with key parent and community leaders. Demonstrating an authenticity in working as partners to examine and respond to the toughest issues is essential to fully addressing them. Everyone understands this; too few follow through.



Trusting relationships also are premised on transparency. Since 2007, the District has never been shy about ranking its schools based on performance. Taking this a step further, we suggest presenting data in ways that convey the impact – and lack thereof – for key reform strategies. No one in the community expects miracles, but everyone deserves a fact-based commitment to mutual accountability. That will be the foundation for strong relationships among leaders throughout our city.

But trust does not get created in one direction. Efforts by individuals who get paid to serve or advocate on behalf of children must be matched by community and business leaders. Otherwise, we are just relying on supermen and superwomen in City Hall or at the District or at the Board of Education – an unrealistic request. No leader is an island. If you lead an NRZ, a community-based organization, or a congregation for example, Hartford children and families need you to extend your support for making and managing social change in our small city. There is no other way for it to happen.

3. ▶▶ Government Leaders Need to Work in Tandem – Not at Odds

Leave the Adult Egos at the Door.

Because the City Council (with its fiduciary and legislative roles), the Board of Education, and the District administration share responsibility for educational change management in our city, all must play on the same team. Towards that end, all should ensure clear and consistent working relationships solidly grounded in: (1) the tenets of a portfolio reform strategy, (2) the governance or management role that each is charged to fulfill, and (3) clear roles and protocols for sharing information and concerns.

A 2006 study of superintendent search processes over the preceding 50 years indicated that the chief cause of superintendents being terminated was their failure to create and sustain a good working relationship with the board¹. What does this entail? Just as the District cannot be well supported by micromanagement, the Board cannot fully support the work of its District without being pulled in early and often to key decisions that carry strong resonance, if not controversy, in the community.

Getting this balancing act right is important, especially because of Hartford's very recent history of education leaders not being on the same page. According to an analysis of superintendents' challenges by the University of Washington, "Whipsawed from within and attacked from outside, superintendents face a choice between taking bold action that is likely to create lethal levels of opposition, or acting with great caution, which is likely to get them fired for lack of results."

Deciding where to land on this boldness-versus-caution continuum is just one of the weighty choices confronting Board, District, Council, and community leaders every day. Their best decisions – and most unfortunate mistakes – seem to come down to resolving tensions among the competing power centers: the State, City, Board of Education, District central office, unions, and community.

Good decisions start from a position of mutual support from all who sincerely seek school improvement in Hartford. And they also start from a position of mutual understanding. This means that there must be adequate Board of Education member training and even frequent City Council presentations critical to allowing everyone to play their unique roles.

4. ▶▶ Focus on Quality of Execution

Developing sound school improvement strategy has been a strength in Hartford for the past seven years – but implementation is uneven.

To be successful, Hartford's turnaround efforts now must focus intently on the impact that strategy is – and is not – having on school culture and on the quality of teaching and learning. Staff at all levels must understand the dynamics of how change happens, from district leadership all the way down to the classroom level.



Over the past seven years, Hartford has launched too many schools with models that stalled in practice:

- ▶▶ M.D. Fox relinquished its original Compact model, as did the Milner Core Knowledge Academy;
- ▶▶ SAND is currently embarking on a process to find a new design; and
- ▶▶ Still other schools, such as the Burns Latino Studies and Asian Studies academies, have held onto their designs... but lacked the necessary resources and supports to implement them fully.

A District commitment to execute school models with fidelity must be non-negotiable for the community, even if it means some schools receive disproportionately more resources than others in order to accomplish their transformation.

Educators at every level can foster continuous improvement within a culture that values implementation over strategy and delivers honest assessments of the quality of *execution*.

And it is just as important that the school communities each help assess implementation, too. They can make major contributions from their firsthand experience to help advance school changes. A school community often knows what is and what is not working, and there are entities like School Governance Councils, school advisory boards and PTOs where the community's voice can and must be heard. The community must drive accountability for great implementation.

Conclusion

Our mayor has termed the school superintendent position to be the most important job in the city. But accelerating school improvement will not happen if driven only by singular efforts from super-persons.

For so many individual, societal, and economic reasons, it turns out that old-fashioned teamwork looms as Hartford's most important turnaround challenge. That looks to be the real work of education reform everywhere in the 21st century, and in Hartford we are positioned to get it right.

As we welcome Dr. Narvaez to the next stage of school improvement, Achieve Hartford!'s staff and Board of Directors are prepared to step up our support for enhancing the educational opportunities of Hartford schoolchildren. We urge all Hartford school stakeholders to do the same, in concrete commitments that they make and stand behind.

Sincerely,

Paul Holzer, *Executive Director*
Achieve Hartford!

The Achieve Hartford! Board of Directors

[1] Anderson, B.G. (2006). Best practices in superintendent search and selection: A discrepancy analysis of superintendents, search consultants, and the boards of education they serve. (Doctoral dissertation). University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.