



# Annual Open Letter to Hartford Education Leaders

## *Amidst Significant Challenges, Significant Opportunities ... We Must Seize Now*

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September 12, 2016

Achieve Hartford! contends that our city and metro area are about to cross the threshold of a new opportunity for school improvement ... or bind ourselves to another era of chronically low-performing schools. The current State and City budget crises – along with the impending change in Superintendent leadership – threaten to put the brakes on the District’s well-conceived acceleration agenda and put us back into “transition” mode. With all this, doubts once again have been raised as to whether Hartford will ever get its act together.

In addition, new State data reveal that while incremental progress is possible, the achievement gap remains a chasm. Indeed, we are more susceptible than ever to cynicism, apathy, or worse, a resignation that “We’re just never going to close the achievement gap.”

But let’s shut the door on that line of thinking, put the responsibility for positive change on ourselves, and turn anger and frustration into impatience and ambition. Let’s think of this moment as an opportunity. Why right now? Because we have a new judicial mandate to find whatever means necessary to do right by our neediest children, because we have another round of Sheff negotiations in front of us, because we have launched a process to structurally address inequity in the Equity 2020 council, and because with the Superintendent leaving, we have a chance to build a leadership team that can take this all on, right now.

After observing closely what’s been possible over the past eight years here in Hartford (and across the country), and what the Superintendent was able to accomplish during her two years in Hartford, we at Achieve Hartford! offer this conclusion: **The only way we can produce success stories for all students – not just some – is to fundamentally alter the disproportionately high concentration of need in our neighborhood schools.**

If we don’t do this, we will never close the achievement gap. Plain and simple.

Hartford isn’t good at conflict. In our city, we have a culture which pushes us to be nice, always. And when any one of us is not, we tend to judge him/her for it. Now is not the time to be nice. Now is the time for all of us to put those bold ideas – long held close to the vest – squarely on the table, with honesty. Now is the time to push each other and embrace that sense of righteousness on behalf of every child, without fear of conflict.

To put us on a stronger path to closing the achievement gap, here are the five opportunities we urge the Mayor and Board of Education to pursue right now:



**1. » Refrain from Conducting a Superintendent Search** and instead engage in a short process to select a permanent leader from the local pool of qualified candidates, who has the capacity to do six things:

- Continue executing the strategies outlined in the HPS Strategic Operating Plan;
- Push aggressive policy change alongside the Board of Education that is aligned with the latest CCJEF ruling in these ways:
  - Ensure that no student leaves high school with a diploma that has no value;
  - End arcane policies for hiring, recognizing, paying and promoting teachers and leaders that ignore effectiveness on the job, fail to treat educators like professionals and rely only on years of experience; and
  - Ensure high-quality special education services are delivered to students who need them;
- Restore trust in government – which has eroded in recent months and even moreso this past week with news of the Superintendent’s departure – through a focus on accountability and communications;
- Adopt an even bolder disposition towards partners and ask all our foundations, nonprofits and corporations how they’d like to partner more deeply, removing any barriers to their ability to lend support;
- Focus almost all resources at central office on the 25 lowest-performing schools in Hartford, giving principals of the 25 highest performing schools complete autonomy; and
- Lead the District through a transition from the current landscape — of District schools *separate* from CREC schools *separate* from Charter schools — to a new landscape where students are guided to attend the high-quality school option of their choice, **regardless** of who manages it.

This last qualification is fundamental to Hartford’s ability to embrace this unique moment of opportunity, further outlined in the four opportunities detailed below.

**2. » Face the Elephant in the Equity 2020 Room** and recommit to the Portfolio Strategy. Will the Equity 2020 process end up simply closing high-needs, small schools only to put more high-needs students into fewer, larger schools? Or are we going to use this process to maximize the number of kids who get access to high-quality schools, looking at every charter, magnet, and higher-quality neighborhood school as a possible solution?

CREC can take more Hartford students in its schools; HPS magnets can as well; Achievement First can be given more space to take on more students; Jumoke Academy the same. Given the capacity numbers in our newer school buildings, so can West Middle Community School and Rawson, among others.

Plain and simple, if we don’t include all school options in this planning process, we must stop describing Hartford as one of the few districts in the country employing the Portfolio Strategy. The education reform launched in 2006 was committed to the Portfolio vision, where stronger schools took on more students and embattled schools eventually shut down or were reinvested in. We have an opportunity to “re-embrace” that vision right now, despite the fact that tough conversations will ensue. The more painful option is to close neighborhood schools and inform students and families they don’t get any access to better options. That is a recipe for disaster and cannot be the final outcome of this process.

For our education leaders to miss this opportunity would be tragic for hundreds or thousands of students and families who know their lower-enrolled, less-resourced schools are not sustainable. Our students deserve better.

**3. » Revolutionize Negotiations in the *Sheff v. O’Neill* Case** by creating and pushing a Hartford



agenda. The case is argued by attorneys representing the side of plaintiffs and the State, but the City of Hartford is a party in this case as well.

Inconsistent leadership on the part of the City over the years has left education and community leaders feeling powerless to influence anything other than magnetization or de-magnetization of a school – and for years the refrain has been, “This is what’s been decided.” This is not the sense of urgency we need from our city leaders.

A decision by the Hartford Board of Education recently, to de-magnetize the Journalism and Media Academy, represents a break from this paradigm, but so much more leadership is needed to make *Sheff* work better. And with a desperate need to more deeply support Hartford’s neighborhood schools, right now is our opportunity. Without stronger leadership from the City, *Sheff* will continue to be a “captain-less” ship, with two sides negotiating decisions while avoiding accountability for the needs of the entire system to be successful.

Thoughtful ways to make corrections – in keeping with the law – must be on the table for a “mend it, don’t end it” agenda. Unfilled seats at a high quality school across the street from an interested family are a shameful consequence of well-intended policies that can and must be modernized. To not pull more Hartford children off the magnet waitlist is completely unacceptable from our perspective, because by adding an additional 35 more Hartford students across all existing magnet schools, we can help approximately 1,000 kids immediately get into stronger learning environments without significantly throwing off the racial balance in those schools. If it’s possible, we must make it so.

In addition, suburban districts experiencing decreases in their own enrollment must get further compelling incentives to take more Hartford students from the Open Choice waitlist. Active regional conversations between mayors and superintendents is a must, and need to happen with haste. And, of course, all magnet schools should be mandated to have a minimum percentage of ELL and SPED students, with applications from those needier students receiving more weight in the lottery. The achievement gap is correlated to the needs gap, period. We must reignite the civil rights flame that launched *Sheff*, and without seizing this opportunity in the way we’ve outlined, that’s not possible.

**4. ► Find More Champions to Serve on the Board of Education** now that Dr. José Colón-Rivas has stepped down and become COO at the District, and now that Dr. Beth Taylor will be stepping down due to a change in residency. City Hall and the Hartford Board of Education must lead a process that inspires us all to recognize – and seize – the opportunity that is in front of us to attract two great new community leaders onto the Board of Education. We must identify Hartford residents who possess a combination of these four qualities:

- Proven ability to build strong relationships and consensus around an agenda;
- Knowledge of key players and assets in our city and region, and a vision to engage more of them in the work of the District to benefit Hartford students;
- Intense sense of urgency to ensure Hartford does right by every single student, family and teacher;
- An understanding that, in order to have success for every child, the system must fundamentally look different years from now than it does right now.

Successful Boards of Education around the country usually have at least one member from the local business community, and we recommend following suit here in Hartford. We should look to the Metro Hartford Alliance to identify a resident business leader who can advocate for more public:private partnerships and channel the need from local business for a more robust local talent pipeline. This will help raise the standard of excellence in our schools and also bring the focus not just on high school graduation and post-secondary acceptance, but on degree completion.



## So, Amidst Challenges, Why Be Optimistic about the Chance for Success in Hartford?

Hartford is not a megalopolis; it is a microcosm of the vast expanses of giant metro areas where poverty is concentrated among millions of people, a small city of some 17 square miles.

While Hartford does not have the resources larger cities have, it has a remarkable concentration of assets per capita:

- Our engaged and invested corporate community is the envy of other small city neighbors and capital city counterparts.
- The presence here of the 15th largest community foundation in America is pivotal.
- The number of surrounding universities represents another significant asset, as do the countless employers who partner with schools and take on interns at the high school and college levels.
- The dedication of nonprofit partners working in education – and volunteers from local corporations – is incredible, as are the large numbers of active and passionate urban parents advocating for their children.

All in all, our community has a tremendous amount of devotion, dedication, and talent. With such a small footprint, and with half of schools in Hartford on their way to closing the achievement gap, the city and the region can get their arms around problem solving here. It is within our grasp.

We *can* be the one city in America that taps every asset, engages every option, and ensures every child receives a high-quality education. Our students and families deserve it; our regional and state economies need it to be so. Amidst challenges, the time is now to act.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Paul'.

Paul Holzer, *Executive Director*  
Achieve Hartford!

The Achieve Hartford! Board of Directors