

Date: October 5, 2009

While I certainly respect my colleagues in the Lincoln School Department, I was disappointed to read recent public statements made by Lincoln School Department administrators: "Increase in charter school enrollment concerns Lincoln school officials!" These officials appear to focus their fiscal concerns on the enrollment of eight students into the newly established Mayoral Academy known as Democracy Prep Blackstone Valley (DPBV)

The charter schools in question are in fact public school systems that offer parental choice. Lincoln parents, and all parents in Rhode Island, have a lawful right to send their children to a public charter school. There are currently thirty-three Lincoln students enrolled in area charter schools at tuition cost to the district of \$7510.00 per-student. It cost the Town of Lincoln \$14,000.00 per-student (RIDE 08) enrolled in our school system, \$11,000.00 or 80% of which is paid by local property taxpayers. It cost the district \$60,080.00 to send eight students to the new DVDP.

It is unfortunate that some public school leaders continue to have difficulty embracing parental choice, achievement standards, lowering cost, and innovations in education that public charter schools help promote. The introduction of DPBV and other public charter schools have the strong support of President Obama, previous presidents, both Democrat and Republican, as well as, the new RI Department of Education Commissioner Deborah Gist and Chairman Robert Flanders Jr.

It seems ironic that school officials chose to publicly sound the fiscal alarm over an innovative \$60,000.00 investment to send eight students to the new DPBV, which by comparison is equal to approximately one tenth, of one percent, of the total school budget. In fact, by embracing these innovative education reforms, Rhode Island has positioned itself to compete for millions of dollars in additional federal educational funding not just for charter schools, but for conventional public schools as well.

It is well published that from 2000 to date, our school department budget has increased by 62%, student enrollment has been steadily declining by 12% since its peak in 2003, and staffing has continuously increased. This provides for reasonable debate that simply increasing funding has failed to have a corresponding impact on student achievement. While I respect that many school officials might disagree with this point of view, a continuation of this debate is illogical as there is no additional funding available and we have no choice but identify ways to reduce costs.

Our nation, state, and community are in the second year of the worst economic recession in decades and this crisis is far from over, especially in Rhode Island. Lincoln has lost millions in local and state revenue, made cuts to all municipal departments, and obtained wage freezes from all municipal employees. Worst yet; state education aid is being supplemented with stimulus funds that will expire in two years. With the state proposing to cut an additional \$700,000 of tax revenue due the community this year, \$560,000 was

allocated to school funding. Local taxpayers, who have been extremely generous to our schools, cannot sustain any further increases.

The challenges ahead will be difficult, school officials must address an additional \$900,000 wage increase scheduled for July 1, 2010. School officials must identify a responsible plan to reduce overall cost while not just maintaining, but improving achievement. Perhaps some solutions can be identified in a rational and comprehensive analysis of how similar school districts spend millions less to achieve better performance results.

I believe that we have a well qualified superintendent that deserves an opportunity to bring both educational reform and fiscal stability to our schools. In support of those goals, we have an intelligent and caring school committee and many excellent teachers in the Lincoln school system. However, it is time for all elected officials to face the sobering reality, officials must move beyond the stalemate of trying to protect the status quo.

It is truly time for leaders to embrace innovative educational reform, respect parental choice, identify and implement needed cost savings, and collaborate to achieve a fair and equitable state education funding formula. The opportunity is rapidly disappearing, if officials fail to respond proactively to the fiscal severity of this situation, we will be exposing our students, parents, staff, and taxpayers to the reality of a fiscal meltdown in our schools!

T. Joseph Almond
Lincoln Town Administrator