

Lisa Cataldi

From: Catherine Sullivan <cesully14@gmail.com>
Sent: Tuesday, March 12, 2024 7:31 AM
To: House Education Committee
Subject: H7726 Written Testimony

Dear Chairperson McNamara and the House Committee on Education,

I am writing to you today to encourage you to support H 7726, which will establish a process public school districts must follow before closing a school. I am deeply concerned about the closures of Fortes Elementary, ASF Broad Street Elementary, Carl G. Lauro Elementary, Gilbert Stuart Middle School, and 360 High School. These closures occurred with absolutely no community input. Repeatedly, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) has shown disdain for students, families, and educators. This legislation is necessary to finally hold RIDE accountable.

I am a Physics teacher at 360 High School. I am in my third year of teaching. I chose this career after graduating with a degree in Electrical Engineering from the University of New Hampshire. Throughout my college experiences, it became increasingly evident to me that my academic and professional successes were not because I was anything special, but existed as a direct result of the privilege I was born into as a child growing up in a small New Hampshire town with excellent public schools. I could have gone on to work in the engineering field and make a significant salary, but I felt called to become a teacher and use my privilege to lift voices that are historically excluded from STEM fields - not due to a lack of intelligence, but due to systemic educational oppression and resulting lack of access to higher education and high-paying careers.

I thought it would be enough to teach at an Urban Public School. I came to Brown and got my MAT in Urban Teaching. I was blessed to find a job at 360 High School, where there is authentic, collective, tireless work happening for student empowerment and where an academic bar remains high for students of all backgrounds that we serve. This place is special, as anyone who has visited will testify. Over the past 3 years, I have been challenged deeply by this career, but I have never second-guessed my choice to be here, teaching. Until now.

PPSD officials told 360's staff about the school closure during a surprise meeting. Communication with the community before, during, and after this life-altering decision has been non-existent. Since then, staff and students have been handling waves of emotion and distraction as we navigate a path forward. Providence students, families, and educators have been bravely fighting to keep their schools open. All of this has harmed and will continue to harm student learning. For students who have experienced difficulties beyond what high schoolers should have to, this was an avoidable trauma. This is shameful for a district that claims to care about students. This would never happen in my small town. This would never happen in Barrington. This should NOT happen in Providence.

The General Assembly has plenary power over education in this state. I ask that you use this power to help prevent not only the inexcusable closure of 360 High School, but also future closures like this from happening. Families who have experienced the pain of secret, sudden school closures deserve meaningful action now.

I hope that you will join me in standing in solidarity with the members of the Providence Schools community, who have seen their schools taken from them without their input. I want to emphasize that this legislation is not asking for excessive or radical amounts of information; it simply requires the very basics of community engagement and community input. Community engagement and input are nowhere near where they need to be in Providence.

Thank you for taking the time to review my concerns. Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,
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