

Opinion: The Inside Scoop on PVD Schools

I've written for *Motif* for a few years now, but this right here is by far the hardest piece I've ever tried to compose. You see when I'm not writing articles or reviewing theater, I'm teaching. I'm an English Language Arts teacher in a high school. A high school in Providence. And wow, do I love my job. Every moment of it. I love driving into the capitol city every day, a city full of the arts, good food, interesting shops, historical landmarks. The city where our laws are made! And I love nothing more than talking about teaching. Just ask my husband, or my mother-in-law, or my best friend, or the person who makes my iced coffee in the morning. I never stop talking about teaching. It's a profession I came to later in life, and one I cannot imagine my life without.

Clearly, when I was asked to write about the proposed state takeover I thought this would be a breeze. After all, those who know me know that I'm not shy about my opinions, especially my opinion about education today.

But a week into the school year and I find myself staring at my third attempt at this, at a loss for words. What do I say?

Do I talk about the success stories? In truth there are too many to count. From the first generation high school graduates I see, to the students who come back after a semester in college to thank us, or the student who blossomed from a shy teen afraid to use their voice into a confident young adult, secure in the power of their words. Would you believe me that on the sixth day of school I encountered all of the above students before lunch?

Should I talk about the vitriol spewed almost daily at Providence Public School teachers, from John Depetro who has not only gone after union leadership online, but tweeted to me that I'm an "overpaid babysitter" who should "give up the dream." How about the dreaded comments section where we see frequent gems such as "fire the teachers" or "what do you expect from a sanctuary city." Or more recently, the email that was sent out from a neighboring school district's superintendent to parents that flat out disparaged the dedicated teachers of the PPSD? Did she think there would be no possible way the email would make its way around our district? That as Providence teachers we don't live in the district she represents? Or has it become so commonplace now to point to the teachers of my district and say vile things because there are no repercussions?

Should I talk about the fact that some buildings have been around since the New Deal was fresh ink, and their infrastructure is in bad shape? But renovations cost money and for some reason, as Rhode Islanders, we seem to accept the fact that we have large buildings that need repairs and consider air conditioned schools a luxury. Instead of talking about the huge financial gap we have to pay for clean, safe buildings, people attack teacher salaries and benefits, as if chipping away at our health coverage will miraculously grow a new roof.

After a summer of anecdotal evidence given at public hearings, which stemmed from a report that was largely made of anecdotal evidence, does Rhode Island really need to read more of the same type of evidence? If you took a microscope to any profession today, couldn't we find horrible things about all professions?

In truth, I don't know what this state takeover will look like. Despite my track record as an effective

teacher, I don't know if my job will be the same a year from now. Although I view myself as someone who keeps up with what is going on, I won't be able to make the "show cause" hearing as it's during business hours, which happen to be the same as school hours. I'm sure the takeover will happen. And although I may not have all the answers regarding the takeover, I know what I hope it'll look like.

- Teachers at the table. Many of the problems in the district have been shouted by teachers for years. We can help fix this with the right partner. The last thing teachers want is an ineffective system; it makes all of us look bad, and more importantly, it hurts our kids.
- School level administration, and school support staff at the table. These two groups are in the trenches almost as much as classroom teachers, we shouldn't overlook these treasure troves of data and skill.
- Families at the table. With support from our families there is nothing our students can't accomplish.
- Students at the table. Our students have a voice. Students know when they're in front of a teacher who is passionate about their content, and prepared to teach it. Their future depends on us, they need to have a hand in advocating for that future.

There are a lot of unanswered questions because truthfully this is uncharted territory. So what do I know? I do know what my classroom will look like; I'll still greet my students at the door, most days with a joke I find hilarious, but they will say is corny. As students pass by I know I'll still be that dorky teacher yelling out greetings to former students, and giving directions to lost freshmen. Inside my classroom there will be large groups of teenagers asking for help on MLA formatting, homework, college essays, or for recommendation letters. We'll study Margaret Atwood, Zora Neale Hurston, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and of course Shakespeare. We'll argue about Shelley and Bronte. We'll write papers, analyze literature, dissect poetry, give presentations, grow as people. Although my students hear the news, we'll focus on blocking it out. As we frequently do we'll laugh, many times at my expense when I try to use the top of the SmartBoard and find myself falling a few inches too short. We'll discuss and prepare for next steps, either the next grade in school, or college, or careers. We'll do what we do best, work hard and ignore the naysayers. I'll cheer when they succeed, which will be often, I'll pick them up when they fall, and through it all I'll not only teach them to advocate for themselves, but advocate for them because I love them.

One of the greatest decisions I have made in life was to go back to school to become a teacher. Greater than that was my decision to teach in Providence. I love this city, and I will tirelessly do my part to ensure we reach every student every day.