



New Haven School Change
NEW HAVEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

To: NHPS Board of Education

From: Garth Harries, Superintendent

Date: February 25, 2015

Re: Tabling Proposed Achievement First Partnership

After listening, discussing, and considering the array of issues raised since I initially proposed the partnership with Achievement First, I have decided to table the Board's consideration of the partnership proposal. While every part of the proposal was designed to support students in New Haven, both in district schools and in Achievement First schools, the tone and tenor surrounding the discussion has become counter-productive to my goals for both the partnership and the district as a whole—it threatens the engagement and collaboration on behalf of students that is a foundation of our School Change efforts.

Whatever the benefits of this proposed partnership, they must exist within a wider context of School Change, and as Superintendent my leadership judgment must reflect a wider set of considerations than any one initiative. Listening to district and community stakeholders in recent weeks, I recognize and acknowledge the deeply-held concerns expressed by many of the people who work so hard to educate our students and support our schools. While I view the proposed partnership as consistent with our School Change Initiative, reflecting both urgency and collaboration, I recognize that a significant number of people do not agree.

We have too much good work to do for New Haven students to stumble on those fractures. This partnership proposal is right now too distracting and too damaging to other hard work and hard choices necessary to pursue our goals. We must build on the very real successes we have seen for students in the last five years and push to pursue new goals stretching ahead to the next five years. I am asking that the Board table consideration of the proposal so that we can both focus on the totality of our School Change effort, and so that we can reset the discussion of a potential Achievement First partnership with a stronger foundation of relationship, trust, and mutual good faith.

As I table the proposal, I ask the board to be mindful of its different parts, which evolved significantly over the course of our conversations in response to public and board feedback. I am attaching our last summary of the proposed terms. My hope and intention is to continue short-term discussions of practice sharing, restorative practices, and equity with Achievement First and other charters, including around enrollment and transfer questions. Behind the abstract policy discussions of enrollment are actual families and students, who want the very best for their children both when they select schools and when they transfer. We as a community must come together to figure out how to better serve those students and families.

The issue of greatest focus in our discussions was the launch of Elm City Imagine with support from the District. I supported that proposal as a win-win, that would not only create an exciting new school option for young families but also enable the District to target reduced early grade class sizes of 18-20 students in 6-8 of our neediest schools, including Wexler Grant, Hill Central, Clinton, and Troup. My hope is that the Board and our partners can at some point in the future reconsider the proposal for a formal partnership with Achievement First and/or our participation in the Elm City Imagine proposal – but it is clear to me that consideration would need to build from a different foundation, with greater trust, mutual respect, and shared focus on student needs.

I am humbled and honored to be Superintendent of New Haven Public Schools and to be a part of this richly diverse and passionate community. I deeply respect and admire the educators—teachers, leaders, and others—who devote their days and nights to the care of the City’s students; it was never my intent to communicate otherwise, and I apologize for the perception that engagement with one set of educators somehow discredited another. That is not how I feel. Instead, I believe we must passionately celebrate our strengths, successes, and the existing team of School Change, and just as passionately be candid about our weaknesses, strengthen our practices, and grow our team to be even more effective with more students. I believe that together in New Haven we can succeed in ensuring that each school can help every student reach their potential, and that the portfolio of schools works powerfully together to inspire ever greater success for students.

As we move forward in New Haven, I will continue to serve and lead in ways that build on and celebrate our successes, that confront difficult issues, and that encourage the creative tensions where growth and learning can occur. I will continue to pursue every opportunity to fulfill our most basic responsibility—to provide every student in New Haven a high quality education that prepares them for success in college, career, and life through real and powerful engagement of students, educators, and the community. Thank you to the Board and to the wider community of educators and partners that support my vision and commitment for New Haven Public Schools. Together, we can achieve our goals and help launch our young people successfully.