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To the Hillhouse High School Staff and Community,

One of the most important projects of our New Haven School Change effort is the renewal of Hillhouse High School. My goal is to return the school to its place as an academically excellent, highly-sought after school, with a strong overarching culture of excellence powered by three strong academies that each provide unique, personalized, and strong learning experiences for their students.

As we pursue that goal, I am conscious that the transformation of a landmark high school like Hillhouse to match our student's modern educational needs is a vital and difficult challenge. In facing that challenge, I reflect on my previous experiences in the turnaround of Bushwick High school, in Bushwick New York. Before transformation, the 4 year graduation rate was roughly 23%. Our decision to create small schools in the building faced intense opposition. But four years later, when the new schools had their first graduating class, the combined 4-year graduation rate stood at more than 65%, and the students and community groups led a parade of graduates through the streets of Bushwick. I have carried two important lessons from this experience throughout my career: first that it is possible to transform our high schools to be more personalized and academically powerful; and second, that although transformation is hard, communities can and do bridge those controversies to do what is best for students.

The on-going transformation of Hillhouse High School has important differences to my Bushwick example, including a starting place of greater strength and a resulting vision of one unified Hillhouse powered by the three academies. But my visits to Hillhouse this fall, with the mayor and independently, underscore important similarities. The fundamentals of the academy structure we have created are strong – students are excited and engaged, results continue to improve, and the majority of staff and parents I have spoken to believe the academies *can* work well. However, it is also clear to me that there are real problems of communication and coordination – problems which are interfering with the transformation, and which are and will be addressed.

Some background is important. In 2009, the 4-year cohort graduation rate at Hillhouse was 41.8%. We may have been graduating large percentages of the senior class, but we were losing almost 6 of 10 students along the way to senior year. Initial transformation focused on the creation of a freshman academy, small learning communities in upper grades, block scheduling, and steps to enhance school culture and climate. Each of these changes brought their own controversies. But by 2014, the 4-year graduation rate stood at 69.4% - and higher percentages of this larger graduating class were going on and being successful in college. This was a major accomplishment, reflecting the engagement of students and families, strength of leadership, and much hard work by staff and the Hillhouse community. These accomplishments have not been celebrated often and loudly enough within the school system and across the district.

However, these recognizable accomplishments are not enough, Standardized test scores showed that more than half of students were not college ready, SAT scores remain exceedingly low and stagnant, and internal review by our instructional experts identified that too few classrooms offered engaging and rigorous learning to their students. Our enrollment records showed that Hillhouse was too often a last "choice" for students and families who would have preferred to enroll elsewhere. As strong as the progress had been, we needed significant growth and innovation to meet our goals.

To address this challenge, the district launched two academies in the fall of 2014 – the Law, Public Safety and Health Academy (LPSH), building from the successful program started by community leaders, and the Innovation, Design, Entrepreneurship and Action (IDEA) Academy, designed to serve the high-tech manufacturing and engineering careers available in Connecticut. These academies began serving 9th and 10th graders, and this year the first two academies grew to serve 11th graders as well. Also this year, a third new

academy opened its doors, serving 9th graders alongside the other academies: the Social Media and Art (SMART) Academy. Both last year and this year, upperclass-students who started before the new academies continued in the College and Career Academy, maintaining the same program they began before the academies started. Each of these academies has their own principal, responsible for leading the students and teachers in their academy, creating smaller more personalized teams responsible for supporting students. The smaller, more focused academy teams also create higher standards of instruction and professionalism. The principals work together as a building council in order to set culture and direction for the overall building.

The first year of implementation shows the evidence of early success. The percentage of 9th and 10th grade students who finished last school year with at least one D or F on their transcript dropped from just over 60% in both grades to 28% of 9th graders and 40% of 10th graders. The graduation rate for last year's seniors in CCR rose yet again, to a preliminary estimate of 71.6%. Students who are enrolled in the academies celebrate the engagement and attention they have experienced from their teachers, and scores of students are receiving certifications that will be useful to them in college and career.

That said, I acknowledge and understand that the creation of the academies have caused legitimate concerns. Our timelines for planning have been quick, and could have more substantially engaged staff and the community, particularly in the initial year of change. Focused as we were on positive transformation, we should have been more attentive to the communication and coordination concerns raised by staff and the community, including the experience and insight into what was working best for Hillhouse students currently. This acknowledgement does not mean we should retreat to the known – I do not believe that a return to the status quo serves our students, nor would a return to the school model of many years ago. I also do not believe that the majority of staff and the community desire a return to the status quo – in my conversations, the vast majority of stakeholders want to build on the successes of the school, and that success includes the opportunity to learn in academies.

We must stay the course to realize the promise of the academies, while taking the necessary steps to improve coordination and communication. Attached to this letter is the District's plan to address the concerns raised, and to ensure that Hillhouse and her academies fulfill their promise. I began discussing this plan with teacher leaders in late November, but was only able to complete that process in the first week of the New Year. We have already begun several of the steps to strengthen coordination and communication consistent with this plan, and we will continue to adapt and improve the school and these plans for communication and coordination. What matters, in the end, is our persistence and dedication to success in the in the long-term.

I also want the students, staff, and families of Hillhouse to know that it is a priority for me to celebrate and publicize the success stories that occur every day within the walls of the Hillhouse campus. There are so many successes. Your leadership and your community is committed to making this a successful school, and I am committed to supporting them in that effort. Most of all, our students and their accomplishments shine brightly. My hope and expectation is that the Hillhouse students will continue to lead their own parade of success.

Sincerely,



Garth Harries, Superintendent of Schools

January 2015: Plan to address Hillhouse Coordination and Communication

In order to improve communication and coordination at Hillhouse and among the school's academies, NHPS will:

1. **Clarify Leadership:** I have asked Zakiyyah Baker to take explicit responsibility as the coordinating principal in the building, with responsibility for cross-building coordination and communication in addition to leadership of her academy. The other principals will continue to lead their academies and report to the Director of Instruction for the school, and the three principals will work together with Ms. Baker's coordination to implement building-wide systems and culture. Principal Baker will have responsibility for ensuring the overall Hillhouse family has clear direction and strength, including opportunities for cross-building professional learning and engagement.
2. **Engage Students:** The school principals have committed to build specific ways for students to interact and engage as a larger Hillhouse family, including particularly through the mentorship of this year's senior class for other classes of students.
3. **Engage Parents:** The PTO and SPMT is being reorganized to allow for one overarching Hillhouse committee, with primary committees focused on each academy. Each PTO and SPMT meeting will include both school-wide agenda items and break-outs into each academy
4. **Engage Staff:** Charles Williams, a retired administrator, has been working as a leadership coach in the building this fall. I have asked Mr. Williams to focus particularly on supporting the relationships and trust between the academy leaders and teachers, ensuring voice, engagement, and participation.
5. **Identify Resources:** One challenge for Hillhouse has been the lack of significant and sustained additional resources to accomplish the school's transition. We have designated Hillhouse as a Title I school in our application to the state, a federal designation based on the percentage of students qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch, which makes additional resources available. For Hillhouse and the academies, this will provide significant additional resources this year and into the future in order to support the school and academy development.
6. **Plan for monitoring and continuous improvement:** I have asked Gil Traverso, our newest director of instruction and a high school expert, to conduct an assessment and review of the building in preparation for becoming the Director of Instruction, or manager of the principals, as originally planned for the school next year. Mr. Traverso will make recommendations to the team and to me on how to strengthen the vision and implementation of Hillhouse and the Academies.
7. **Follow-up:** I have committed personally to participate in monthly project management meetings focused on Hillhouse, to be sure that there is full follow-through from school and district leadership in supporting school improvement including communication and coordination in the school. That started in December, and will continue.