

Request to the State Board of Education to Sustain Hartford's Redesigned, Magnet and Choice Schools

SCHOOL-BASED SENIORITY

The proposed resolution requests that the State Board of Education protect the progress of Hartford's students in high-performing magnet, choice and redesigned schools that require special training and qualifications of teachers by taking corrective action to apply school or program-based seniority to protect these teachers and administrators. The action would enable Hartford schools to retain teachers who have training and experience in the specialized school models. The resolution is based on the following principles:

1. Every child is entitled to a qualified teacher.

This is the greatest civil rights issue of our generation. Hartford families have a right to expect a teacher who wants to be at their child's school and is trained on the school's pedagogy or content. The relationships that parents build with teachers and administrators should be long-term.

2. The most qualified teachers based on training and experience should be retained.

Teachers are professionals, not interchangeable parts in an industrial system. Their training, experience and role differentiation must be matched with distinctive school program requirements for a school to be successful.

3. If the achievement gap is to be closed, the highest performing schools must be sustained and expanded.

Hartford's success in closing the Achievement Gap has been based on the creation of a portfolio of specialized schools using research-based content or pedagogy. Good schools can only be sustained by a qualified, stable staff, in which teachers undergo significant training - sometimes multi-year training - in that model's program of instruction. Examples: Core Knowledge, America's Choice, Montessori, International Baccalaureate, Micro-Society, Breakthrough, High School, Inc, OPPportunity High School and Early College Models in partnership with the University of Hartford and Capital Community College.

The following facts support this change:

- **School-based seniority protects qualified teachers at each specialized school from being bumped by those not qualified for that model.**

A State revenue crisis and *Sheff* desegregation quotas will force significant reductions in staff for 2010-11 and 2011-12. Current seniority assignments place specialized school models at risk of losing the qualified teachers that have so far ensured their success. For 2009-2010, 86 teachers had to be placed from the available teacher list in new or redesigned schools. And 27 teachers were placed from this list in specialized magnet schools. In compelling testimony at Board meetings, parents were outraged to find that key staff of their child's school had to be "bumped out" while others were placed at a themed school for which they did not feel qualified, trained or connected. Principals were also frustrated to have constant disruptions to school stability and staff, while still being held accountable for closing the achievement gap. It is anticipated that another 90 teachers will have to be placed for 2010-11 under the current system.

- **State law requires and authorizes the State Board of Education to intervene to improve student achievement in low-performing schools and districts.**

Under Section 10-223e(c)(2) of the General Statutes, intervention by the state Board of Education can include directing the assignment of teachers and principals and any closely related actions. The board has the authority to override any conflicting law or collective bargaining agreement when issuing these corrective actions on behalf of children. The Connecticut law is similar to that of neighboring Rhode Island's – a state that has already taken this action.

- **The Hartford Federation of Teachers indicated over the course of the personnel cuts in 2008-2009 and again in January 2010, that it is not interested in modifying the current labor agreement to allow an alternative to district-wide seniority.**

Binding arbitration, under law, is not an option because Connecticut arbitrators are limited to comparisons with agreements from other districts. Two districts in the State have attempted to raise achievement by offering the public a portfolio of high-performing specialized schools, Hartford and the Capitol Region Education Council. The latter is now the second largest system of schools in the region.

- **School-based or program-based seniority has been used for years in the state-funded schools operated by the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), establishing an example for the State Board of Education to follow.**

Through entrepreneurial leadership, CREC has developed a system of high-quality specialized magnet schools. CREC's seniority provisions recognize that bargaining unit members that have been hired and trained in a particular school or program are the most highly qualified in terms of the skills or experience needed to perform in that school or program.

- **The corrective action, if approved by the State Board of Education, preserves the seniority rights of teachers.**

This is not anti-union or anti-seniority proposal. Only 2 of Hartford Public Schools 12 unions – those representing school leaders and teachers – are affected. Many aspects of the current seniority system most important to unions have been built into this request. For example, district-wide seniority would be used to determine necessary reductions among teachers in the same specialized school or program model. Principals and teachers in “traditional schools,” i.e. schools that are not specialized and not magnet, choice or redesigned schools would have district-wide seniority within this group of schools. This is the evolution of seniority in a manner that protects the most qualified teachers in each school and enables Hartford schools to succeed in a competitive environment. The most astute union leaders will recognize that unions will only do well and retain dues paying members if the District can compete and thrive by parents choosing its schools.

- **A corrective action order from the State Board of Education allowing school-based seniority would still be subject to Impact Bargaining between the district and the two unions.**

The HFT, the Hartford Principals and Supervisors Association and district representatives would discuss how the union membership would be affected by the corrective action and revise contract language as necessary to determine how it is implemented.

- **Extensive research supports the idea that school-based seniority is consistent with the State Board's responsibility and necessary if the school turnaround in Hartford is to succeed.**

In one of the most comprehensive studies on effective school reform, “The Turnaround Challenge”, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2007, made the case that states must put teachers “in the right

positions to do their most effective work,” and have the authority to modify collective bargaining impediments to school reform.

- **Other states and cities have already acted to change seniority provisions to ensure that their lowest performing schools turn around.**

Last year, Rhode Island’s Commissioner of Education, Peter McWalters, issued a corrective action order that required Providence Public Schools to implement “hiring and job assignments that are driven by student needs rather than seniority.” He further ordered that labor contract language that prevented compliance with the action be removed or modified. McWalters’ successor, Commissioner Deborah Gist, has since issued the same corrective action to the rest of the state, stating that no district can rely solely on seniority for assignments. California, Ohio and Arizona have taken similar steps. AFT unions in other cities have agreed to provisions that recognize special training, experience in position, and qualifications, as well, as system-wide seniority.

School-based seniority is about students, the quality of their education and the sustainability of Hartford’s reform through tough economic times. If we do not adjust our business model, we will go out of business. Astute teacher-union leaders will recognize that there will be more teaching jobs if our schools are competitive. The old system is unable to maintain quality in an environment of diminishing resources. We must change while there is still time.