



Executive Summary

In May 2019, the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy led a review of the Providence Public School District (PPSD). We did so at the invitation of the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) Commissioner, Ms. Angélica Infante-Green, with the support of Governor Gina Raimondo and Mayor Jorge Elorza. The Partnership for Rhode Island funded the review.

We know from existing data that student achievement in Providence has been low for decades. Despite the hard work of countless teachers, administrators, and city employees, the latest RICAS scores show that, across the grade levels, a full 90 percent of students are not proficient in math, and a full 86 percent are not proficient in English Language Arts.

Creating strong academic outcomes for urban students, many of whom are economically challenged and speak English as a second language, is a challenge across the United States – not only in Providence. That said, as our report lays out, our team found unusually deep, systemic dysfunctions in PPSD’s education system that clearly, and very negatively, impact the opportunities of children in Providence.

Based on our direct observations and interviews, we found that:

- The great majority of students are not learning on, or even near, grade level.
- With rare exception, teachers are demoralized and feel unsupported.
- Most parents feel shut out of their children’s education.
- Principals find it very difficult to demonstrate leadership.
- Many school buildings are deteriorating across the city, and some are even dangerous to students’ and teachers’ wellbeing.

Our review work included: interviews and focus groups with parents, school leaders, teachers, and leaders at all levels; visits to schools across the city; input from a team of independent local and national education experts; and a review of a broad range of documents and data provided by PPSD and the Rhode Island Department of Education.

Primary Findings

As you will note in the full report, there are many interrelated challenges across PPSD. All of them point back to a central, structural deficiency:

Providence Public School District is overburdened with multiple, overlapping sources of governance and bureaucracy with no clear domains of authority and very little scope for transformative change. The resulting structures paralyze action, stifle innovation, and create dysfunction and inconsistency across the district. In the face of the current governance structure, stakeholders understandably expressed little to no hope for serious reform.

The great majority of those we interviewed reported that the system neither worked well nor presented a coherent vision. They differed only in their explanations and examples. By far the most frequently stated view was that the system lacks clear delineations of authority, responsibility, and accountability.

The consequences are multiple and seriously detrimental for the students in PPSD:

1. **PPSD has an exceptionally low level of academic instruction, including a lack of quality curriculum and alignment both within schools and across the district.** *Very little visible student learning was going on in the majority of classrooms and schools we visited – most especially in the middle and high schools. Multiple stakeholders emphasized that the state, district, and business community have very low expectations for student learning. Many district team members and community partners broke down in tears when describing this reality, which classroom observations verified.*
2. **School culture is broken, and safety is a daily concern for students and teachers.** *Our review teams encountered many teachers and students who do not feel safe in school. There is widespread agreement that bullying, demeaning, and even physical violence are occurring within the school walls at very high levels, particularly at the middle and high school levels. We were particularly struck by the high incidence of teacher and student absenteeism, which appears closely linked to school culture and safety.*
3. **Beyond these safety concerns, teachers do not feel supported.** *Educators report a lack of agency and input into decisions at their schools and classrooms. They are also unable to improve their teaching, with most citing a lack of professional development as a key factor. As a result, the review teams encountered meaningful gaps in student support. These gaps ranged from too few ELL-certified teachers and special education staff, to widespread difficulties with substitute teachers that leave students without subject-matter experts or coherent instruction. Many people noted that the collective bargaining agreement presents a systemic barrier to good teaching in two primary ways: limiting professional development opportunities and severely constraining the hiring and removal of teachers.*
4. **School leaders are not set up for success.** *This was a particularly striking finding, given how influential school leaders can be - even in some of the deeply challenged school systems in which our Institute has worked. Principals and other school leaders repeatedly*

reported that they are held accountable for results that they have neither resources nor authority to influence. Almost all of them are demoralized and defensive as a result. They all referenced the collective bargaining agreement as impeding their ability to exercise leadership and oversight in their schools. At the same time, we encountered some judgments and attitudes from individual principals that, based on what we know about effective schools, do not support higher student outcomes.

5. **Parents are marginalized and demoralized.** *In a system that is majority Latino, we expected to encounter multiple initiatives and programs that connected parents to the schools their children attend. That was simply not the case. The lack of parent input was striking on its own, but the widespread acceptance of this marginalization was of particular note.*

These realities run contrary to the necessary components of high-performing systems in the United States and around the world.

We note one particular success that consistently emerged across all constituencies: **Every group noted the presence of many devoted teachers, principals, and some district leaders who go above and beyond to support student success.** We hope that this core group of leaders and teachers provides the foundation upon which Rhode Island and Providence can build in the future.

We offer this report as a contribution to what we hope will be a positive and affirming process across the City of Providence to address the systemic challenges we highlight and to deliver greater educational opportunities to future generations of students who attend the city's schools.