

**SPECIAL CRANSTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE**

**PUBLIC WORK SESSION**

**JANUARY 3, 2012**

**WESTERN HILLS MIDDLE SCHOOL**

**400 PHENIX AVENUE**

**EXECUTIVE SESSION 5:00 P.M.**

**PUBLIC WORK SESSION IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING EXECUTIVE SESSION**

**PUBLIC SESSION IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING WORK SESSION**

**MINUTES**

**This meeting of the Cranston School Committee was held on the above date with the following members present, Chairperson Iannazzi, Mr. Lombardi, Mrs. Ruggieri, Mr. Bloom and Mr. Traficante.**

**This meeting was called to order at 5:10 p.m. It was moved by Mr. Lombardi and seconded by Mrs. Ruggieri and unanimously carried that the members convene to Executive Session pursuant to RI State Laws PL 42-46-5(a)(1) Personnel, Discussion of Administrator A's contract; PL 42-46-5(a)(2) Collective Bargaining and Litigation; (Cranston Area Career & Technical Center – Supreme Court Mediation Update),(Contract Negotiations' Update – Custodians), (Consideration of legal options regarding status of aid to education appropriation and legal advice relating to same). All were in favor.**

**Call to Order – Public Work Session was called to order at 6:00 p.m.**

**with the following members present: Chairperson Iannazzi, Mrs. Ruggieri, Mr. Lombardi, Mrs. McFarland, Mrs. Culhane, Mr. Traficante and Mr. Bloom. No votes were taken in Executive Session.**

**Roll Call - The roll was called; a quorum was present.**

**Public Work Session:**

- a. Presentation by the Rhode Island Mayoral Academies**
- b. Presentation by Achievement First**
- c. Fiscal Impact Presentation by Committee Member Bloom**

**Chairperson Iannazzi stated – there will not be a presentation tonight by the Rhode Island Mayoral Academies and Achievement First. They were both invited in the middle of December; an invitation was extended via email to Christine Lopes to present to the Cranston School Committee. Her response will now be read into the record: (on file in the Superintendent's office) –**

**Dear Chairwoman Iannazzi:**

**As requested, I'm enclosing several documents about the Achievement First Mayoral Academy Providence-based proposal, which includes: answers to frequently asked questions; responses to specific questions you provided regarding Cranston; and some additional information I thought may be of interest to you.**

**Over the past several months, there has been extensive discussion and public debate on opening an Achievement First Mayoral Academy in Rhode Island. Based on the feedback we received about**

**the initial proposal, several aspects were changed, including: moving the location to Providence, delaying the opening until 2013 and expanding the number of communities eligible to enroll. The new application was submitted to the Rhode Island Board of Regents for its consideration and we're now awaiting their decision. The full application can be found on the RIDE website at:**

**<http://www.ride.ri.gov/commissioner/charterschools/applications/asp>**  
**x**

**There has been a lengthy public discourse, several public forums and many questions asked and answered with regard to this proposal. Considering that the Cranston School Committee has publically voiced opposition to the proposal on multiple occasions, we do not believe any new ground will be gained by participating in another hearing. Following a decision by the Board of Regents, regardless of the outcome, we look forward to a new dialogue with you and the members of the Cranston School Committee.**

**Please contact me if you have any additional follow-up questions.**

**Very best,**

**Christine Lopes, Chief Strategy Officer**

**Chairperson Iannazzi continued – I would just like to ask the crowd, open it up, is there anyone present from the Rhode Island Mayoral Academy? Is there anyone present from Achievement First? There being no one present we will now move on to what is not going to be a Fiscal Impact Presentation, however, it is going to be more of a discussion amongst the School Committee relative to the fiscal impact of this proposal. We do also have a public speaker, Ms.**

**Lizbeth Larkin.**

**Lizbeth Larkin, President, Cranston Teachers' Alliance**

**As we find ourselves once again dealing with Achievement First, it seems like a bad reoccurring dream but anyway I stand before you, I could not resist to publically speak and be put on the record in defending Cranston Public Schools as I know that you have been committed to Cranston Public Schools as well and that you wanted some information on the fiscal impact that this Achievement First network of schools would have in Cranston.**

**Once again they have not come. They did not come when they first struck the deal with Mayor Fung; they did not come during and explain anything in any one of the meetings that's been going on since their plot in 2010. Here we are in January of 2012 and although we got Cranston's application voted down on the September 1st Board of Regents meeting, we find ourselves once again involved in another application and still no answers. I have to stand here as President of the Cranston Teachers' Alliance to defend all of the hardworking teachers, support staff, and administration who work every day for all children and who do not segregate out groups through a lottery and also then counsel them back into the school system that they left. Now I really find this group fascinating. The more I am around them the more I just can't believe how they will not be transparent. They will not explain exactly what it is that they are looking for. They call us high stakes when we are professionals and we have had a career in Cranston Public Schools and other public school systems. Yet, they have RICAN who has an up to \$800,000**

**budget for salaries alone purely to push the agenda of Achievement First, purely to push that agenda to get them in. Obviously this is very high stakes. We were crucified during our fight to keep them out and while things have been a little bit laid-low I'm sure they still have the same feelings about educators in Cranston. We were told that we did not reach out or challenge our low economic and/or minority students. That is not true as you well know. We were told by the Commissioner that reaching AYP was not enough it was settling. We've settled. We were told that we thought we worked hard every day but that we didn't. We were totally annihilated, assaulted and demoralized by this process and yet it comes out that their schools do not do as well as any of the schools that we have done just as well if not better a job with everyone. So I just wanted to make my point and go on the record in defending Cranston and the other communities and Achievement First is not the resolution. I also have an issue with the fact that they don't want to follow the Rhode Island Charter School laws so that separates them out. They don't want to follow any kind of regionalization because they want to involve several districts in over 17 schools eventually. They don't have to follow the regionalization rules of Rhode Island education. I think they should have to follow the same rules as everyone else and my final statement that we all know about the story of the Trojan horse and it's not the horse, it's what's inside.**

**Mr. Lombardi stated – Madam Chair, I know you are going to get into the fiscal impact issues briefly or summarily, however we are going to do it, but I feel compelled that when I got this letter in my update on**

December 28, 2011 I highlighted the following sentence used by Ms. Lopes; Considering that the Cranston School Committee has publically voiced opposition to the proposal on multiple occasions, we do not believe any new ground will be gained by participating in another hearing. I can only help defer from that sentence that she is of the belief that there is some sort of agenda, hidden agenda, with this School Committee and I urge the public to realize it. It is certainly not that and I heard Ms. Larkin use the word transparency. That is what this is all about. We've been on the road at all of the hearings involving Achievement First, the so-called Fung application, and now the Tavares application. We know for a fact, according to the words of Achievement First themselves that this is a changed application. It is a revision of the original Fung application to what is known as a Tavares application so do we have an agenda here on the Cranston School Committee? I don't know if we do as a group but I do as an individual, my agenda is to have questions answered for me so that I can perform my fiduciary duty to my electors which happens to be the entire city of Cranston. That is, what effect does this have on our numbers fiscally? What in fact effect does this have on our students and our students' needs? What happens if we have special needs students? What happens if those special needs students have to leave not only our district but the mayoral academy – what happens then and who picks up the tab and how is that determined? How are their needs tended to? What happens if a kid doesn't go to college and what happens on the fact that the numbers that they brag about sending their kids to school? In short ladies and gentlemen I want to

know the answers to the questions. There is no agenda here. It sounds to me that Ms. Lopes and the Mayoral Academies believe they are going to come into a buzz saw that is the Cranston School Committee and that isn't the case at all. We have a responsibility. We are facing a reduction in our student population as a result of the presence of these mayoral academies. I think we have every right in the world to invite them here and they have an obligation to be here. Secondly, and I will give up the floor, I received, and I think we all received a rather astute email from a Tom Hoffman who is a Providence resident and I think Mr. Hoffman who professes not to be a lawyer prepares a very cogent legal argument about the status of this charter school application. I would urge, and one of the questions I would ask of these mayoral academies representatives is that under Rhode Island General Laws 16-77.4-1 a mayoral academy is defined as a charter school (and I am paraphrasing) which enrolls students from more than one city or town including both urban and non-urban communities and (the statute adds the word and) offers an equal number of enrollments to students on a lottery basis. The question I would ask of them is tell me how your application which reads "it is important to note that this application does not have a set number of seats per community" jives with this statute that I have just read and I think that is problematic and Mr. Hoffman to his credits asks the Cranston School Committee to request a formal legal advisory opinion from the Rhode Island Department of Education and I would be certainly at the next available meeting, I would be more than happy to sponsor such a resolution on his behalf.

**Chairwoman Iannazzi stated – I just want to clarify for the record, we as a School Committee feel a lot of frustration as the lack of information going back and forth between Achievement First and the Mayoral Academies and Cranston Public Schools but I do want to stress that Ms. Lopes has been the only individual with both groups, the Rhode Island Mayoral Academies and Achievement First, that has responded to any questions so I do not want to, for lack of a better term, throw Ms. Lopes under the bus because she has been the only person that has responded to our emails and questions.**

**Mrs. Ruggieri stated – In addition I have said that to Ms. Lopes several times. The thing that I did communicate to her when I heard they were not going to be attending this meeting was that I know they have been through a host of meetings but I still felt the main reason for pushback from the communities that are involved now is that lack of transparency, the lack of communication within the proposed communities and missing information. What I had said to her was I would have thought they would have been glad for an opportunity to come forward and clear up any misinformation that's being floated about as well as answer questions. As you all know I ask a lot of questions and I did last summer ask a list of questions to be answered and I still hadn't received answers to several of them. I resent, per Ms. Lopes request, I resent the questions again and apparently they came through tonight at probably ten of five which I don't have the ability to get stuff off my computer from here so I do have some answers I just don't know what they are right now. The other thing that I found interesting was that the Providence City**

**Council had an education sub-committee do a study on Achievement First this Mayoral Academy proposal and they actually are recommending that only one school be opened because they believe the fiscal impact will be so damaging that they are requesting that they wait three years before they open a second school. The other thing they are recommending is that the applicant clarifies the lottery and admission process. Now this is something that I brought up at the last hearing and I'm still waiting for an answer for which is the Rhode Island General Law about the equal distribution about the population through communities. So I would like to see how they are going to handle that. I would hope the Board of Regents actually received a copy of this sub-committee report. The other thing they did was because they were not sure about what the population was going to be as they presented it in several different scenarios with a 25% population all the way up to a 71% population distribution just in Providence which the flip side of that affects us depending on if there is 71% from Providence or 25% from Providence means that our impact fluxuates with those numbers as well which we don't know what that is because we have not received any information. I just feel that a lot of what is going on is lack of information and a clear presentation of what is actually going to occur probably would have made this process a lot less contentious and would have helped to maybe get a community in focus. I had said it at one of the meetings that RICAN spent I don't know how many thousands of dollars on tee-shirts and buses and whatever they paid the bus load of people who they brought into this meeting to come. I have no idea what they**

paid them; if they paid them; I'm just saying they spent a lot of money on tee-shirts and buses and if they had spent that money engaging the communities that they are hoping to have be a part of these schools maybe we could have had some sort of outcome where every student in every city would have benefitted.

Mrs. Culhane stated – I've been doing a lot of tweeting today and reading a lot of various articles and one that I came across I found very interesting and almost slightly disturbing and it was about CONCAN which is in Connecticut which is similar to RICAN here in Rhode Island and if you will look at the setup of CONCAN it is very similar to what's going on with RICAN and RIEMA and Achievement First where you have a slew of inbreeding going on. All of these organizations are private organizations so unlike the Cranston Public Schools Committee you can't look up on some website to find out how much is Mr. Bill Fischer, who works for both RICAN and RIEMA is making. What compensation is he getting? All of this money, if Achievement First gets the schools they are looking to open within the next year or so their management fees alone will be in excess of ten million dollars. I don't know about anybody else's school departments but our management does not make ten million dollars here in Cranston so I find it very disturbing. I encourage everybody to search the internet for these websites because there are a lot of people out there who have no interest in either. They are not union people, they are not school people, they are people who care about their kids, they are people who care about education, they don't have an agenda except to bring transparency to the table which as elected

officials that is what we are all supposed to be doing. So it's a little upsetting to me when I know that I come to a meeting and need to sit to hear what all of you say that RICAN can just say no, we don't want to come, we don't care what you have to say. Another interesting article that I would advise you all to Google if you have a chance is an article that came out from the NWACP just recently, within this last week. The NWACP as a board of directors has come out against charter schools essentially as they advocate for closing the gap. The NWACP as I have read it and as others that I have been discussing with have said that they don't believe that charter schools are the answer that the charter schools think they are. And I think a lot of us have said that we believe a lot of the times some of these charter schools are looking for somebody to push their agenda and we saw that clearly evident at the last meeting that was in Providence where we saw busloads of people who were wearing Achievement First tee-shirts that didn't even know why they were there. So I think what we need to do is look a lot closer and look through the guise of we want to close achievement gaps and we want to give people choice because when you are not telling me how many students are coming from each district I don't know what kind of choice I have or when you're telling me you are looking to close gaps for minority students and black students I clearly don't have a choice in that so I would like to know what kind of choice they really are planning on offering other than the choice to raise their coffers to ten million dollars over the next couple of years for their management fees.

Mr. Lombardi stated – following up on my point and I apologize if

anything I said would appear to be directed specifically at Ms. Lopes, it was not. I just happen to quote her letter because it was her letter that attached the answers to some of the questions that we did get and I think just summarizing a few of them. First of all the bulk of the answers to our questions they provided us with what they called; Frequently Asked Questions Regarding the Proposed Providence Based Achievement First Mayoral Academy. The independent so called questions that they answered, apart from the frequently asked questions went something like this – asking what would the financial impact be on Cranston from an Achievement First Mayoral Academy. The answer – questions about the fiscal impact of charter schools on districts like Cranston and the impact to the funding policy should be directed to RIDE. So, they don't answer the question. Then they go on to their frequently asked questions and they clearly identify is this a redo or an amendment to the previous application. Their frequently given answer is this is a revised version of the original application but it is a new submission that will go through a new review process. Then they give us their plan of initially 176 kids first then K and first grade and then second and kindergarten and so forth and so on and then again the question, in their frequently asked questions, what will be the financial impact on each community. And, the answer is, because of Rhode Island's new school funding formula; each of the four communities included in this application will receive additional resources in the coming years. The new funding formula was designed to ensure that state funding is equitably distributed to districts based on enrollment data and student needs. I don't think

that answers the question again. Then it goes on to talk about how we lose our funding per student on a staggered basis going on. But again the reason for our asking them to be here is to be able to answer those specific questions. Their frequently asked questions and answers to those frequently asked questions don't get to the point that we need to get to.

Chairwoman Iannazzi stated – first of all and I don't think my colleagues would fault me for speaking for us as a whole in saying that we're not opposed to new ideas, we have collaborated on a number of new initiatives in Cranston. We are involved in a new teacher evaluation, we are involved with a new evaluation tool for administrators, we're involved in the DANA center research, we are as a district committed to improving education for every student that is enrolled in Cranston Public Schools. And with that theory in mind the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, and I went to Blackstone Valley Prep and the Assistant Superintendent and I travelled to the Armistead Academy and we were open to seeing exactly what this charter school looked like and what I came back with, and I won't speak for the Assistant Superintendent, but what I came back with was an understanding of what resources they had given to them in Connecticut and it is really important to note and I don't think this has garnered any press whatsoever but the funding formula in Connecticut is dramatically different than the funding formula here in Rhode Island. In Connecticut the money does not follow the student, instead students who are enrolled in an Achievement First school take approximately 75% of a per pupil expenditure with them to

**Achievement First. However, their home district doesn't lose that funding. The Achievement First schools in Connecticut are funding 75% by the State with no harm to the sending districts. If that were the case here in Rhode Island I don't think we would all be having this conversation. Similarly in New York, Mayor Bloomberg funds the Achievement First schools there. Money is not harming any public schools in New York City so I think that it is really important to note the distinction in the funding formula is between the states. I would vouch to say that's probably 99% of Cranston's objections to the school is based on funding so I just wanted to make those two small points and I know the Superintendent has a lot to say.**

**Mr. Nero stated – Well, here we go again. Originally it was with the money with me but I have to be honest with you. Last spring when I first found out about the op ed piece that was going into the newspaper and the issue about AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) and it was sent back to me that when I said that 16 of our 17 elementary schools met AYP and all 3 middle schools did I was told - don't we want something more than adequate? Sure we do. But unfortunately four Achievement First Schools in Connecticut did not reach AYP; did not reach Adequate Yearly Progress. So when that issue came up the folks from Achievement First and the spokesperson Ms. Singh, she stated that AYP was largely unattainable: AYP was largely unattainable. You can write that down too. Bottom line is that I spoke in Warwick. All 16 of their elementary schools met AYP; 2 of their 3 middle schools met AYP; and in Cranston 16 of our 17 elementary schools met AYP; all 3 middle schools met AYP. In North Providence,**

where I spoke at that Town Council meeting, all 9 of their schools, including their high schools met AYP. I would be the first one to tell you that our two high schools did not meet AYP and I'll tell you why. It has been proven to us that it is statistically impossible that large high schools that have high special ed population cannot make AYP because they will always fail in at least one category and that's why children have disabilities and that's why they will fail. Again, North Providence, kudos to Joe Goho, a great principal there but doesn't have the sample population that we do. I know schools pretty much inside and out I've made it my business. This is my 36th year that I am finishing up and I know good schools. I know I have 3 excellent high schools in this city. I will tell you; of the 46 schools between North Providence, between Warwick and Cranston, 42 of the 46 schools met AYP watched by their spokesman who said this was largely unattainable. So what it really comes down to now is the money issue, more importantly the academic achievement issue which we are doing here in Cranston. But now I'm going to switch back to the fiscal issues moving forward because we are not exactly sure how many kids are going to end up going to the Achievement First Academy or the Mayoral Academy because the way the application is written, it could be 20% as Warwick could have 20%, and it could be 10% as North Providence has. However, they have minimum quotas so we don't know. Cranston could be affected or other districts could be affected by if Providence doesn't draw its 50% will ours go up to 25% or even as high as 49% for the students that will attend the Mayoral Academy? But here we are in Cranston,

**we're paying down our debt and last year we had a tough year but it seems this year is a better year and next year, my budget will be coming out, will be a better year. We are going to pay the note off. But it's been done by at least two, possibly three School Committees that have had to make tough decisions and as Superintendent who has lost a lot of sleep because he's had difficulty balancing the budget but it took for example, the teachers came forward and renegotiated their contract with us making it quite favorable so we can pay our debt back. But we are so far behind the eight ball that I want to bring back the music program, the gifted program, I want to bring all of those things back into Cranston that we have been taking out of the budget. On top of that we haven't even focused on asset protection in this district. We have buildings that are in dire need of repair and I'm not just talking about Capital Improvements. I want to focus, starting next year on asset protection and I want to focus next year on technology in our classrooms and I can't do that if my money is leaving my district to go someplace else and that is a fact. Now I have been through this argument going back to last May. I can refute and shoot down everything that they told us starting with AYP and this is a shame that it continues to go on and on. Thank you.**

**Chairwoman Iannazzi asked if anyone else had any comment and asked Mr. Balducci to just for the future, maybe for our update on Friday, RIDE somehow over the past couple of months have a new interpretation of their funding formula and they are now alleging there is a seven year phase in for charter school tuitions so hypothetically speaking if a student were to leave Cranston Public Schools**

tomorrow it would not be until year seven that Cranston would lose the entire per pupil expenditure so I am just wondering if that is in fact accurate and if you could provide perhaps an updated fiscal impact as to how many students we do have currently in charter schools and what that looks like in our current budget.

Chairwoman Iannazzi continued – there is a member of the public that has her hand raised so if you want to come forward and just identify yourself.

**Monica Teixeira, resident of Cranston**

Ms. Teixeira stated – I am the mother of a 9 month old and my husband attended Rhodes Elementary where we are hoping to send our son to Rhodes. I have been very concerned about this proposal to open Achievement First. As a member of the public I attended the public hearings in the summer, I attended the protest outside of Cranston East High School, I wrote letters to the individual at Regents and I thought we had won this fight fair and square. Well wouldn't you know it, we really didn't win the war, we won the battle. My question really is to you in terms of strategizing about what the public can do because it seems to me that the money issue is not just about the money that will be siphoned from our schools but it's really the money that is influencing what's happening with respect to this issue the money that politicians may be receiving. We know there are groups such as Democrats for Education Reform that are very involved in these efforts and that are supporting and propping up political candidates that support charter schools particularly the type of charter schools that Achievement First represents and so my

question is how do we overcome that obstacle? Are there individuals, elected officials, here in Rhode Island who we can go to and say why don't we actually appeal this horrible law that takes the power away from the voter that takes the power away from School Committees, from City Councils? It seems to me that there is a middle ground here. There are folks who are opposed to charter schools completely and I don't think that this issue necessarily requires us to take that extreme position. I think we can find a middle ground which says, okay, let's have charter schools but let's have charter schools that still go through the traditional process that are still accountable to a Superintendent that are accountable to a School Committee to a City Council but to have the Mayoral Academy law to me that is what needs to be repealed. My other comments just have to do, very briefly with the history of this. Some years back, some of our elected officials had been wise and had chosen not to fund the Mayoral Academy that currently exists in Cumberland. There were two schools at that point, it was that school and another regular charter school and I don't remember the name of. They had not been funded. Well, Arnie Duncan visited the state and some of you may know this, visited the state and put pressure on the state to actually fund those two schools and said, if you do not fund, find the money for these two schools, Rhode Island will run the risk of not winning money through Race to the Top. That's the pressure that is being exerted on the state from as high as President Obama and Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan which leads me back to my original point which is, how do I as just a regular person without deep pocket have any impact?

**Chairwoman Iannazzi thanked the speaker and stated – just so everyone is aware of the upcoming events – the Board of Regents will be holding a hearing on Thursday from 4-6 p.m. over at the Department of Education on Westminster Street in Providence. They are expecting to be voting on the application on January 19 at 11:30 a.m. also at RIDE at Westminster Street in Providence. There will also be a public rally in opposition to the application on Martin Luther King Day at 2 p.m. at the State House and as always members of the public are encouraged to contact members of the Board of Regents and Governor Chaffee. Are there any other comments?**

**Mrs. Culhane stated – I just want to make a general statement but I do want to respond to the comments that you made. Some local School Committees and City Councils have actually sent non-binding resolutions to the General Assembly asking them to allow school districts...to allow School Committees and City Councils to be able to have a vote, to be able to have any kind of charter school or mayoral academy be contingent upon a vote of the elected body of officials of that city or town. There are many states that actually have those kinds of things in place. I think I was reading today that Iowa may be one of those states that no new charter schools can come into a district unless it has been approved by the electors which really is you because you elect us. So what I would do...that is a simple way to start is to encourage our General Assembly to work on changing the legislation or making it thus that elected bodies have to have a say in this because the fact that money that we are allocating...that we have been voted in to allocate is being usurped by private money**

**is quite frightening and it should be quite frightening to anyone who is a voter, anyone who is a citizen that your money, your tax dollars can really be taken and spent by private organizations without your knowledge or your vote so that is what I would encourage everyone to do.**

**Chairwoman Iannazzi stated – we are now going to adjourn to our public meeting.**

**No votes were taken during Executive Session.**

**Executive Session minutes sealed – January 3, 2012.**

**A motion to seal the minutes of Executive Session was made by Mr. Lombardi and seconded by Mr. Traficante. All were in favor.**

**A motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Lombardi and seconded by Mr. Traficante. All were in favor. The meeting adjourned at 6:36 p.m.**

**Respectfully submitted,**

**Frank S. Lombardi**

**Clerk**