



Testimony to the Philadelphia School Reform Commission

Re: Suspension of Selected Requirements of the School Code and Related Regulations of the State Board of Education

Presented by Donna Cooper

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I come here today after listening to two press conferences in City Hall. The spectacle akin to the movie *Ground Hog Day* has continued to play out over and over again for the last ten days in City Hall. It's very disappointing that the adults in City Hall who need to reach agreement on how to release \$50 million to the school district cannot do so. It sets a terrible example for our children and only makes your job harder.

But they are in that fight, and we are in this room in this fight, because the Governor of Pennsylvania imposed a \$1 billion cut to public schools in this state and he has stood behind state laws that make it nearly impossible for you to put a balanced budget in place. I'm referring specifically to the laws that drive charter costs higher and higher and make it illegal for you to plan and budget charter school enrollment, as well as those that require you to meet the state mandated increases in pension payments without state funds to help pay for these rising retirement costs.

I don't envy the job that you have, nor do I envy the job of the union when it comes to these negotiations. But I am here to urge the parties to come to the table and get those negotiations done.

With respect to the resolutions before you, I want to speak in favor of the use of the SRC powers to create charter enrollment agreements and expedite the closure of failing charters. These are powers you must use to bring the budget into balance and ensure charter quality. Your willingness to use these powers is long overdue.

With respect to the use of the powers affecting the teachers and other school professional staff, I think it's in the interest of our teachers, students and all stakeholders that those changes be hammered out in the union negotiation process. Public Citizens for Children and Youth,

along with the Urban Affairs Coalition, the NAACP, the Philadelphia Education Fund, United Way and Congreso support contract changes that put all hiring, rehiring and transfers into the site selection process. We want to create vibrant schools where teams of teachers with their principals and community members are empowered to select the teachers they want to add their team, and who can add value to their building. Site selection process for the filling of all vacancies should be put into place via the contract.

There are two elements of the special powers you seek to use that I believe should be taken off the table. First, I question the purpose of the powers you are seeking with respect to the hiring of staff in Independent Schools. The powers are proposed leave the door wide open to all sorts of contracting out without constraints. Until the SRC has a very clear idea of what it wants to make happen that cannot happen under the current rules, and explains that to the public and union, these powers should not be sought or used. Doing so will breed dissention and distrust in a district already overwhelmed with struggles.

We also oppose using or seeking the power to suspend the salary scale with respect to longevity. Here again, the SRC is not clear about what measures it would use in lieu of the predictable salary schedule currently in place. Until a clear and fair alternative proposal for how teachers will be paid is presented and discussed publicly, seeking to use these powers will be seen as suspect. Furthermore, effective teachers, with experience, are likely to look elsewhere to work. That's not good for our students or for new teachers in need of mentors.

We realize that you and the union are in a very difficult position and that the conditions that force us to have this meeting today are not of your making. But you are the adults in the room, and you must come to agreement. We urge the union and the district to spend every day of the next two and half weeks at the bargaining table to put in place the agreements needed so that our children can return to school to motivated teachers, caring counselors and the other important support staff necessary for our schools to be the safe, nurturing and academically rewarding places we know that every child needs.