

# Shaking Up RI Education: Mayoral Academies Offer Hope For Change

By Robert Cushman

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A FEW YEARS AGO, closing Potowomut School in Warwick made sense strictly from a financial standpoint. With the school department under increasing pressure to cut costs, most of the building not in use, and a forecast for a continued decline in enrollment, it was becoming too costly to operate.

However, as members in the community pointed out, Potowomut was more than a school. Because the neighborhood is separated from the rest of Warwick, the school was a center of all local activity. With no control over illogical laws mandating invisible boundaries between cities and towns, the school never had a chance to become cost-effective and remain open.

Now that members of the Potowomut Academy of Technology and Humanities (PATH) have accomplished a remarkable step, by securing a \$750,000 federal grant to reopen the building as a charter school, Potowomut has the potential to do far more for public education in Warwick than just keeping a neighborhood school open.

The question remains: Would creating a mayoral academy charter school help or hurt Warwick's public schools? School administrators are concerned that the PATH school would cost the department, as the system would be responsible for paying the tuition and transportation for Warwick students attending the school.

This position, while correct, does not account for the long-term intangible benefits of a new collaborative teaching environment in Warwick. For years, the School Committee has tried without success to eliminate many of the longstanding, ineffective stipulations written into the teacher contract that hurt students, provide no incentives for teachers to excel, are inflexible to administrators, and unnecessarily drive up costs.

A small business continuously losing market share to a competitor, yet unwilling or unable to change, will ultimately be forced to downsize or go out of business altogether. Is public education in Rhode Island similar to those businesses (i.e., AIG) that can't compete in today's worldwide economy, are being bailed out using billions of our federal tax dollars, yet continue outrageously wasteful spending?

As Mayor Scott Avedisian suggests, "this is a real opportunity to see that governance reform takes place." By letting the mayoral academy operate free of ineffective union controls, the school can develop a model that promotes competition, change, innovation, and efficiency — attributes needed throughout all Warwick public schools.

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## *Mayoral Academies*

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During my experience on the School Committee, for example, we worked to eliminate outdated methods used to assign additional teachers to a classroom. The administration demonstrated that necessary personnel could not be deployed to a classroom because contractually mandated formulas used to determine the need did not work.

Instead, we recommended a collaboration model with the principal, department head, and teachers all involved. Through continuous re-evaluation of each classroom, each teacher, and the students, the department head could assign a teaching resource wherever the need was greatest.

The union negotiating committee rejected this commonsense approach, with the chief negotiator insisting that the department head was not capable nor the teachers smart enough to perform the task. They claimed the formula was the only way to guarantee teachers were treated equally. To this day, the same antiquated formula is still in use.

We have created an educational system that has lost its focus, where entrenched practices have become the norm and innovative thinking is traded during negotiations like hagglers at a yard sale. Educational reform and best practice is an afterthought, negotiations are dominated by salary and benefits demands, and change is forced down through districts without much local input by the state, through costly unfunded mandates.

Public education in Rhode Island is at a breaking point. It needs a force that will make effective change mandatory. The mayoral academy concept in Potowomut can do that. Collaboration between administrators and teachers will be essential to develop the best practices that benefit students, teachers, and administrators. Efficiencies will keep the doors open. Every person in the PATH school will live by the charge, "perform or close," a nonexistent concept in today's public schools.

Unfortunately, another neighborhood in Warwick will soon experience the heartache of a school closure. It is time city and school leaders give this concept a chance. If successful, PATH just may provide the opportunity for the rebirth of other closed buildings as new mayoral academies in these neighborhoods and lead to the competitive forces needed to change Warwick's public school system.