



Cranston City Hall  
869 Park Avenue  
Cranston, Rhode Island 02910  
401-461-1000

**Allan W. Fung**

Mayor

November 30, 2009

Superintendent Peter Nero  
Cranston Public Schools  
845 Park Avenue  
Cranston, RI 02910

RE: Mayoral Academy

Dear Superintendent Nero, *Peter*

Thank you very much for your letter of November 23, 2009. I do not doubt for one minute your pride and commitment to the City of Cranston and its public schools or the depth of your experience in public education. I know that you, and everyone involved in the Cranston Public School District are working to improve student achievement in our school system. If we disagree about how to raise student achievement and opportunity in Cranston over the next decade, it is surely an honest disagreement.

As the son of immigrants who chose to build their business and their life in Cranston, I too have great pride and total commitment to my community. As a true product of the American dream, I have committed myself to public service. And, as Cranston's Mayor, I have a responsibility to do whatever I can to improve the lives of Cranston's families and to raise concerns when the health of the community is threatened.

I confess that I do not remember the Newsweek article from sometime in the 1960s that highlighted student success at Cranston East. Without taking anything away from that accomplishment from before I was born, I share the concern of so many Cranston taxpayers and families that are living in the present that too many of our children are not being prepared for a life of active citizenship in Rhode Island.

Though I have pride in Cranston's past, as Mayor, I necessarily have to focus on our present and future. Our present is showing me that our demographics and needs are changing. ~~This is bringing forth new challenges for us now and in the future.~~ As a city, we need to adapt and innovate to meet these new challenges.

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For example, Cranston East's present, I know you'll agree, is cause for concern. On this year's state assessment tests, only 16% of Cranston East's 11<sup>th</sup> graders scored proficient in math. For low-income, Latino and Asian 11<sup>th</sup> graders (who together represent a third of the student body) proficiency dips to 8-9% and for African-American students (well over 100 of whom attend Cranston East) to a startling 3%. Only half the students at Cranston East currently take the SAT test necessary for them to even be eligible to attend a four-year college and the students that do take the test score below the national average.

You are correct in noting the extraordinary student diversity in Cranston Public Schools. I see this diversity as one of our community's greatest strengths. And you are not wrong in noting the unique challenges that face the many low-income and minority students who arrive at our schools each year. They and their teachers have to overcome these difficult challenges to reach proficiency and beyond in math, reading and writing.

On top of this, the state has for almost two decades failed to respond to changes in our levels of enrollment and percentages of disadvantaged students. An intelligent education funding policy would result in Cranston receiving an equitable and predictable amount of state aid per student and I know this would have a positive impact on our ability to educate all of Cranston's children.

However, I believe that any suggestion that "socio-economic factors" determine student performance is inaccurate. Likewise, it is misleading to compare Classical High School to the charter schools with which I am familiar. I am, as you know, a proud alumnus of Classical and I think it is an important public school option for Providence students. As you note, Classical requires an entrance exam and is, by definition, selective. Charter schools like Democracy Prep Blackstone Valley in Cumberland and KIPP Academy in Lynn, Massachusetts are open to everyone. Both of these schools make sure that every family in their enrolling region has an equal opportunity to attend through aggressive outreach and awareness campaigns. They are not selective in the least.

At Democracy Prep Blackstone Valley, nearly two-thirds of the students are from low-income families and a third are English Language Learners, percentages that surpass the region from which the school enrolls students. As I learned on a recent visit to the school, half of Democracy Prep's students entered not being able to identify all the letters in their own names.

At KIPP Academy, 87% of the students are low-income minorities. Despite this level of disadvantage, 85% of KIPP's 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored proficient in reading and 78% scored proficient in math on Massachusetts's challenging MCAS assessment test in 2009. Nor is KIPP a "Roman candle" innovation. There are now 82 KIPP schools enrolling over 20,000 students across the United States.

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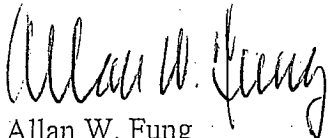
As I expressed recently in the Cranston Herald and the Providence Journal, having seen KIPP Academy in person I am not surprised by their stellar student outcomes. They have the flexibility to innovate and have used that flexibility to do whatever it takes to prepare their students for success in the world. This is all I want for Cranston families.

The General Assembly, in its wisdom, created a space for innovation in passing the Mayoral Academy law. I believe Mayoral Academies can both provide an important public school option for Rhode Island parents and serve as a model for all Rhode Island educators interested, as I know you are Superintendent Nero, in dramatically improving the prospects for our children and for our state.

Let me be clear: my goal is for *every* child in Cranston to attend a great public school, for *every* child in Cranston to graduate from high school with skills and a multitude of excellent choices to make about their future. I believe Mayoral Academies can help our great city realize that goal. The families of Cranston deserve the benefit of this innovation every bit as much as the families of the northern Blackstone Valley.

I look forward to further conversations with you and the people of Cranston on this important issue.

Sincerely,



Allan W. Fung  
Mayor

cc: Commissioner Deborah Gist  
Cranston City Council  
Cranston School Committee  
CPS Principals  
CPS Executive Team  
Union Presidents  
Providence Journal  
Cranston Herald