

***Rhode Island: Demand what you want, and be relentless until you get it!***  
Thomas C. Wigand

***Imagine if the K-12 education system in Rhode Island was the best in the world - in its realm, considered the "Ivy League" of K-12 education. What would be the effect?***

The children in Rhode Island would enjoy the prospect of an incomparably better future than they do now. Their parents would enjoy the eminent satisfaction of knowing that their fundamental and timeless role as parents and providers is complemented by providing their children with the foundation upon which they will enjoy a standard of living higher than their own, i.e., *the quintessential American dream*.

Our teachers would enjoy the ‘halo effect’ that would rightly come from being the critical element in the world's foremost K-12 education system, and so, be restored to the professional status and community esteem which that noble profession should enjoy. Moreover, they would find themselves in demand throughout the country, recruited from places near and far, and so, would benefit from the market forces that would actually increase their compensation above what it is now (and rightly so).

Consider the lengths to which families now go to have a home in a community with “good schools.” A similar dynamic can work with companies contemplating relocation. In this sense, all other citizens would benefit because Rhode Island would become a magnet for companies offering high-quality jobs, not only because those companies would seek out Rhode Island's skilled workforce, but because the **decision-makers at those companies would find Rhode Island’s preeminent educational system attractive for their own children.**

So, education is not only the preeminent issue for children and their parents, but our preeminent economic development issue. This vision is *what could be*, for there is no reason why Rhode Island could not have the best K-12 system in the world. But, we are far from this vision; in fact, our state education officials don't even pay lip service to that “stretch goal” as an aspiration. **Indeed, can anyone here tell us exactly what is the measurable “goal” of Rhode Island’s education establishment? There is none that is apparent - and how can one meet a goal that doesn’t exist?** Sure, our education establishment talks in

platitudes and generalities, but the net effect is that *it aspires to mediocrity and then struggles to achieve it!*

Year after year, decade after decade, the Providence Journal publishes the results of Rhode Island's education system. And year after year, decade after decade, from source after source, Rhode Island's education system is found wanting. Year after year, decade after decade, like a bureaucratic Punxsutawney Phil, Rhode Island Department of Education Commissioner Peter Mc Walters emerges from his burrow and is quoted in those articles with two recurring themes: either that "they're working on it" or that "it's not us, it's just that the high number of poor children brings down the averages" (or some combination of those two themes). He then disappears back into his burrow, patiently awaiting the next Providence Journal story, so that he can emerge and regurgitate the script developed to defend the public education establishment once again. *RIDOE - the Rhode Island Department of Education - should more accurately be called the Rhode Island Department of Excuses.*

Let us say, for the sake of argument, that poor children are more challenging to educate. Intuitively, this would seem to be true. Yet, over the decades, Rhode Islanders have stepped up to the plate and given the "educrat" establishment more taxpayer money to successfully confront those challenges, all as recommended by the education establishment. **Per-child taxpayer expenditures are much higher in the so-called "urban cores" than they are in the suburbs - which through state aid are bankrolling the education systems in the urban cores, in addition to their own.**

Yet, by Commissioner McWalter's own admission, these urban children are still not being educated well. The perennial "educrat" response will be that they still don't have enough money, **but we've been hearing this for decades, and we've been coughing up the money for decades, with little or nothing to show for it.**

Thus, only two conclusions can be drawn. First is that the children in the urban cores cannot be educated to a level competitive with their suburban peers. We know this is not true. Consider the movie "Stand and Deliver" about an inspired and inspiring inner-city school teacher who bucked the system; his "underprivileged" students became academic champions. The second and only other conclusion is that, in spite of the huge decades-long monetary inputs - or "investments" as the "educrats" like to say - the current system is failing those

children. I submit for your consideration that this is the accurate conclusion. ***The problem is not that urban or underprivileged children are dragging down Rhode Island's public education scores; the problem is that Rhode Island's public education system is holding them down!***

Consider that on the so-called "Nation's report card", Rhode Island's public education system scores below average for the United States. Certainly, other states have "underprivileged" children as well, so why does Rhode Island score below average? Moreover, in international comparisons, the United States - the richest country in the world - scores below average against other advanced countries. These rankings indicate that **this country's public education system is structurally deficient, and Rhode Island's is even more so!**

So what is the solution? RISC is proposing certain goals and the solutions achieve them. Let me briefly describe them:

GOAL	SOLUTION
Healthcare Reform	Statewide plan with uniform co-shares
Pension Reform	Defined Contribution Plan (401k)
Teacher Evaluation	Formalize & standardize
Public Disclosure	Publicize costs vs. performance; benchmark
Management Rights	Return authority to principals to match responsibility
UCOA / GASB	Uniform accounting standards across districts for transparency and comparison

To the foregoing I would like to add a personal goal and solution – not yet one that RISC has endorsed, but one that I submit is worthy of consideration: "universal vouchers." These are vouchers that follow the child, enabling parents to select the school that their child will attend, be it "public" or "private."

Most of us in this room are old enough to remember Chevy Vegas and Ford Pintos. Remember how the Vegas had engines that consumed nearly as much oil as gasoline? Remember how Pintos had gas tanks that would explode when the car was rear-ended? Later improvements in vehicle quality did not come

because Chevy and Ford "saw the light", but because they were forced to meet external competition by the likes of Toyota and Honda.

Such is the nature of monopolies and oligopolies - they become focused on pleasing their internal constituencies rather than their external customers. So it is with Rhode Island's education establishment. While we certainly can force improvement from the inside, ultimately we may need external competition, such as voucher systems and parent choice, to bring about the fundamental improvements that ensure that, someday, Rhode Island's children will have access to a world-class educational system, if not the world's best.

And there would be added benefits. Currently, parents in many communities, such as East Greenwich and Barrington, seek to "protect what they have" vis-à-vis their public school systems because they believe that they have excellent schools. While it is true that these systems are superior to what one finds in a Providence or Central Falls, **the parents are operating under the misapprehension that their children are receiving a world-class education.** This false impression leads to the formation of parent groups such as "Save our Schools" in Portsmouth and "People of Westerly" that have the noblest of intentions, but in accord with the "law of unintended consequences", are also *helping to protect the very status quo that is holding their children back.*

For instance, such groups lead parents to resist potential cost saving measures such as regionalization, and one can understand their motivations. With a system of universal vouchers, however, there would exist a safety valve - many students would enroll in private schools, and their parents would not be inclined to protect the status quo within the public system.

So how do we start? Those of us who "served time" in Catholic schools recall being told that we should always ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" In this context, I think a fair variation is to ask ourselves, **"What would the teachers' unions do?" The answer is, "What they always do - demand what they want, and then be relentless until they get it."**

So, we can start by demanding what we want. And what do I mean by that? First, individually, **let's start demanding it!** One way to start is to appeal to our elected representatives, *not in a timid way, but an affirmative way.* We don't ask them "if" but "when". We appeal to them at public forums and in front of people, where it will be difficult for them to "weasel out". We start with the

presumption that **what we want is self-evidently good**, and we do not ask them if they will support us, but rather, ***“What are you doing to bring universal vouchers and other creative educational solutions to Rhode Island?”***

Second, we must support groups like RISC, and encourage our like-minded acquaintances to do the same, for as the unions know, there is strength in numbers, and together we can counterbalance their influence on our elected leaders. ***And then, like the unions, we must be relentless!***