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Dr. Linda Lane, Superintendent

December 2, 2013

The Honorable Paul Clymer
216 Ryan Office Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2145

RE: PPS testimony for House Education Committee hearing on December 3, 2013

Dear Chairman Clymer,

On behalf of Pittsburgh Public Schools, please accept my appreciation for the opportunity to submit written testimony on policy issues that put students first. My letter articulates the District's position in support of furlough and recall policies that consider performance in addition to seniority.

Two years ago marked the 100th anniversary of our District. We are the second-largest school system in Pennsylvania, educating 26,463 students in 54 schools. Seventy-one percent of our students qualify for free or reduced price lunch. We have nearly 4,000 employees—and many extraordinary teachers.

For the past 100 years PPS, like most districts, did not have the ability to accurately understand differences in teachers' effectiveness, much less respond to these differences in meaningful ways. In fact, just four years ago, we had little information about the effectiveness of our teachers. We could not provide them with meaningful feedback to help them improve. Our decisions were often based on characteristics such as years of service and credentials, not on performance.

Teachers told us in no uncertain terms that their evaluation process wasn't working. It wasn't helping them improve, and it wasn't reflecting what was true about teaching performance in their schools. We all agreed the old system was not working.

With this call to action from our teachers, we engaged more than 400 educators representing every single school in our district. These educators, along with national and local experts and with the support of \$85 million in private and public funds, joined together to advance the teaching profession in Pittsburgh.

After four years of hard work we believe we are at the beginning of a new era. We have research-based measures of effective teaching that provide an unprecedented picture of teacher effectiveness. Many teachers are using this information to improve results for students. School leaders and District staff are using the data to better support professional growth, and make smarter decisions on behalf of students.

The difference between our highest performing teachers and our lowest performers is significant, and has a lasting impact on the lives of children in Pittsburgh. We now know that our most effective teachers "are producing gains in student achievement that are large enough that, if accumulated over several years without decay, could erase achievement gaps between black students and white students, or between Pittsburgh students and statewide averages (Lipscomb, Gill, and Booker, 2010).

This ability to better understand teaching through multiple, research-based lenses, provides the opportunity to improve antiquated policies. In Pittsburgh, we have seen the negative effect of furlough (and recall) policies that do not allow performance to be considered along with seniority.

Furlough and recall policies based solely on seniority have taken highly effective educators away from students, and forced us to return ineffective teachers to classrooms.

- PPS workforce reductions in the summer of 2012 resulted in 16 teachers performing at the Distinguished level (per our baseline performance levels) being furloughed. This means that we removed 16 of our most highly effective educators from our classrooms. Happily, 12 of these teachers returned, but not without a gap in service—and four of their peers did not return.
- The workforce reductions resulted in 17 teachers performing at the Failing level being furloughed. “Failing” means that these 17 teachers were consistently performing at the lowest levels in the District across multiple measures of effectiveness. Yet, as a result of seniority-based recall policies, 11 of these teachers are now back in the classroom in front of PPS students.

These policies have undermined the stability of our highest-needs schools, disproportionately affected low-income communities, and compromised transformative efforts our community has invested in.

- On June 1, 2011 we made the difficult decision to stop the launch of two new Teacher Academies. These Academies would have provided an entirely new way of bringing teachers into the District and preparing them for successful careers. But imminent furloughs, combined with system seniority provisions, made it necessary for us to cancel the opening of this promising program. More than \$1 million was spent on planning and opening The Teacher Academy before its cancellation.
- In 2012 as we prepared for furloughs we saw that approximately 40% of PPS teachers with 0–4 years of experience in the District were concentrated in eight schools—all serving high-needs students. Many of these eight were schools we had invested millions in turning around, re-staffing, or opening as new with the help of significant private and public grants.

There is public support for progress.

- More than 80% of the public in Pittsburgh agrees that school districts should be able to take things other than seniority into account when faced with tough layoff decisions (Winston, 2011).
- In 2012, over 1500 community members sent postcards, emails and letters to the district and union asking us to find a better way to administer furloughs and recalls.
- Our District’s Board of Directors approved a resolution in 2012 entitled, “Development of a Teacher Furlough Process That Puts Children First.” The resolution points to the evidence telling us that teacher effectiveness is critical to ensuring student success and clarifies how seniority-based furloughs have a disproportionate impact on our most vulnerable schools and students.
- Our city’s largest print media supported improving how furlough decisions are made (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, “Softening seniority: Other factors should help decide teacher layoffs,” May 3, 2012).
- Looking outside our state, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality, by last year 11 states had already moved to *require* districts to consider performance in making reductions in force.

We recognize that these policies were originally conceived for good reason. And we also want to be very clear that we are not in any way suggesting that teachers with fewer years of experience are more effective than their more senior colleagues. In fact, our results show highly effective (and ineffective) teachers at similar rates across all levels of experience and seniority.

We simply believe it is our obligation as adults to use the best available information to make decisions that maximize the number of students, especially high-needs students, experiencing the extraordinary power of great teaching. On behalf of Pittsburgh Public Schools, we urge you to adopt policies that enable districts to ensure an effective teacher in every classroom, every day, for each and every student.

Sincerely,

Dr. Linda Lane
Superintendent, Pittsburgh Public Schools