



Schools and Communities United

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August 19, 2015

President Michael Murphy
Milwaukee Common Council
200 E. Wells Street
Milwaukee, WI 53202

President Murphy:

We of Schools and Communities United offer our compliments to you, the City, and City Clerk Jim Owczarski for his affirmative assumption of the role of clerk to the Charter School Review Committee (CSRC). We welcome his input into the process of the CSRC's work, starting at their meeting last Thursday, August 13, by explaining some of the standards the CSRC must follow going forward. He gave his remarks in the same upbeat, helpful manner in which he has dealt with us. We also welcome clerk Linda Elmer.

Based on the content of the other items on that meeting's agenda, we regret that we must again address questions to you about the seriousness of this committee.

The committee announced that King's Academy had dropped out of the City's charter program. That school had taken up considerable portions of CSRC meetings in April and June and the Steering and Rules Committee meeting on June 11 with a full court press describing the strides they were making and why the Common Council should renew their contract. In those meetings, they claimed that past problems were being rectified by competent new administration, etc. Without benefit of the spring test scores, the Steering and Rules Committee recommended extending the contract on a probationary basis.

Now suddenly King's Academy is pulling out, justifying their unexpected reversal on the grounds that the school is going to become more "Christ-centered." That's all well and good, but if authorities in the church and school had no inkling of this change in June, their abrupt turn in a matter of two summer months shows a lack of stability in their whole operation. In fact, virtually the entire staff of the school has been terminated and new staff hired for the 2015-16 school year. Apparently, the chairman of their board has also resigned. Is this series of events not a cause for concern about the City's charter school selection and oversight?

We would have expected the CSRC to ask how this turnaround happened so suddenly or at least to express some surprise. Instead there was not a single question – only understanding smiles, assenting nods, an expression of gratitude to the school for having been in the City program, and best wishes for the future. Where is the accountability this committee is expected to demand?

Did the committee or its consultants, the Children's Research Center (CRC), know about the changes at King's Academy in advance and agree not to be critical at the meeting? If so, how far in advance

did they know? We wonder what contractual obligations the City now has vis-à-vis King's Academy, a school that remains under the City's auspices but no longer has the incentive of a new contract to meet expected standards.

At the August 12 meeting, new principals for two other of the shakier schools – Milwaukee Collegiate Academy (MCA) and North Point Lighthouse Charter School – were introduced. But the CSRC did not ask why they were hired. All we heard was another litany of positive changes from the new principals, with beaming smiles and encouragement from committee members. You will recall that when MCA's principal and Dr. Howard Fuller testified at Steering and Rules to the school's progress and stability, Dr. Fuller suggested that the City leave oversight of MCA to the school's own board. North Point will have a student body of over 400, yet only eight of last year's teachers are returning. Their administration is working to "transform" the school and implement a "very scripted curriculum."

Finally, at this CSRC meeting, when contracts requiring taxpayer funds in the hundreds of thousands of dollars were approved by the committee, there was not a single question. We would have raised these issues in the meeting, but no public input was allowed. We wonder whether major changes are in the offing for Milwaukee Math & Science Academy, which is to come before the CSRC on September 10 or 24.

We believe that the Common Council and the citizens it represents have a right to more businesslike and transparent behavior on the part of the Charter School Review Committee. Allowing regular public testimony would be an important step toward transparency and democracy. Politeness, civility, and good will are all desirable virtues, but not at the expense of serious, critical accountability.

Sincerely yours,
Ingrid Henry,

Jenni Hofschulte

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is for Ingrid F. Henry, written in a cursive style. The signature on the right is for Jenni Hofschulte, also in cursive, with a large, stylized initial 'J'.

Co-Chairs, Schools and Communities United

cc: Steering and Rules Committee Members City Clerk Jim Owczarski