The Elorza Vision for Education
Pt. 1: The full service community school as a center of excellence
and a model of creative, collaborative problem solving

Introduction
I am a product of the Providence Public School System. I attended Asa Messer for elementary school, middle school at Bridgham, and graduated from Classical High School. Everything in my life, including the opportunity to run for Mayor, was made possible because of the investment the people of this city made in me through the public school system. Although we may not all have a direct connection to the schools, we all invest in them simply by choosing to live and work in this city. These opportunities made all the difference in my life, and I want to make sure they exist for the next generation of Providence school children. More than that, I want to make sure that it’s being managed wisely, to deliver the best results for our students. And make no mistake about it, whether you have a child in the school system or not, they’re all our students, because collectively we make an investment in them as our future leaders.

For me, the public school system was the pathway out of poverty. I understand powerfully and personally the crucial difference that a good education can make in a child’s life, that education is opportunity. I want to preserve and improve upon that opportunity for all of our students, to make sure they, too, have a pathway to a better future.

We always talk about the need to “fix” our schools, that our schools are “broken.” Each successive administration comes in with its own exhaustively detailed plan to “fix” our “broken” schools, and yet year after year we continue to fail our children in our most important responsibility to them. I don’t believe that our schools are broken and need to be fixed; I believe that our education system is not built for the challenges that face our kids today, and needs to be re-envisioned.

Over three successive releases, I plan to outline my vision for our schools. I don’t have all the answers, and I don’t trust anyone who says they do. This three-part vision then is not an attempt to be the final word on improving our schools. Instead, this is the
beginning of an ongoing conversation I plan to have with every one of you about the future of our school system. It’s meant to engage students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the entire community in the work of making our educational system better, more effective, and more responsive. In this first part, I will outline my vision for full service community schools with wrap-around programming; this will make each school a center of excellence not just for the students, but for entire neighborhoods. In the second release, we will re-examine the “one size fits all” approach to education and evaluation, and propose a different vision – one that will empower our students and teachers to make learning happen anywhere, anytime, and in many forms. In the final part, we will turn our attention the more nuts-and-bolts aspects of the school system, the management practices and systems necessary bring about substantive change.

Again, this three-part approach will by no means be a catchall manual for solving every problem. Rather, it is an attempt to identify the biggest, most immediate challenges based on my exhaustive conversations with our city’s educators and policy experts. These vision statements will help us take action in a way that is at once bold and pragmatic, authoritative and collaborative. They are the beginning of our work, not the end.

A Vision for Full Service Community Schools
Let’s begin with my vision for full service community schools with wrap-around programming. That may sound like a lot of academic jargon, but it’s really quite a simple concept that begins with a simple question: Why? Why are our school buildings only open for about half the day, and less than half the year? Why are these buildings not accessible at night, on weekends, or during school vacations? These facilities and their grounds are valuable public resources, so why are we not maximizing their value by using them as much and as often as possible? Why are these school buildings closed-off fortresses of learning for a fixed number of hours on a fixed number of days, rather than vibrant centers of year-round activity and learning for the neighborhoods in which they’re located?

Full service community schools are places that focus on community partnerships, integrating academics; youth development and enrichment; extracurricular programming; social, behavioral, and health services; family support; and community development. Community schools open their doors to the wider network of nonprofits, businesses, governmental agencies, and other resource providers so that they may bring the important work they’re already doing inside the school walls, and make them available to all constituents in need of them. This is the “wrap-around programming” of which we speak: activities, classes, services, seminars, lectures, and more that happen
within the schools during nights, weekends, and school vacations. Full service community schools with wrap-around programming are one-stop hubs for students, families, and neighborhoods. They are accessible to the entire community and alive with programming all year round.

My vision is a school that is the center of excellence in its community, and a hub of its neighborhood beyond the school day and even the school year. The school building will serve as a place for our children to learn, and also a venue for after school programming, recreation, neighborhood meetings, adult education, community services, clubs, movie screenings, and so much more. My vision is a school where a child can have class during the day, sports in the evening, and a study group on the weekend, while his or her parents take GED, ESL, or even art classes at night, volunteer to read to kids in the afternoon, and host a book club over the summer. My vision is of a teenager becoming a high school graduate in the same building where his or her parents become U.S. citizens; a school where every single resident of the neighborhood, regardless of whether he or she has a child in the school system, feels like a stakeholder in its wellbeing.

My vision is not a capital letter School System, but rather a system of schools, all working in concert to prepare our children for the future. My vision is a system of schools in which teachers feel empowered and engaged, able to inspire and engage students without fear of interference from top-down bureaucracy or the changing political winds.

My vision is a school system in which teachers and administrators collaborate to make substantial decisions based on each school’s individual needs. My vision encompasses public schools that are the prides of their neighborhoods existing alongside private schools that are actively engaged neighbors, universities that are connected to K-12, and charter schools that can test innovative new ideas, then share what they’ve learned with the public schools.

My vision is an education system that is more than simply a system; it is a complex ecosystem, in which many communities co-exist and collaborate, and all benefit. My vision is schools that bring outside social services inside their walls, so that community partners are working together under one roof to serve children and families. My vision is a business community that is engaged as a stakeholder in that ecosystem, and helps us prepare our children for future success now by teaching them the skills that employers will need for years to come. My vision is school buildings in which students are on a first name basis with teachers and principals, and also with tutors, mentors, parents, coaches, social workers, police officers, public health workers, community leaders, artists, and business people.
This is my vision for full service community schools with wrap-around programming. These are the schools that will educate, enrich, nourish, and develop our children. This is the school system that will attract and retain the brightest minds and greatest talents in education. These are the centers of excellence that will empower and engage the entire community to do the heavy lifting of creating a better future.

I have a vision for the school system, and plan to achieve it that is both comprehensive and informed by existing research, and also realistic and flexible enough to leave room for the unique challenges we will encounter along the way. I can’t do it alone, and the work will not be complete in my first term, or even my second. I can’t do it alone because it takes our entire city, engaged and working together as One Providence, to truly transform our education system. And the work will continue not because we’ve left anything undone, but because our education system is not a static structure. It’s a dynamic vehicle that can speed up, slow down, and change course in order to help our children arrive at their destination.

My plan begins not by asking, “How much is this going to cost?” but rather, “How can we use the money we have more effectively, and how can we leverage existing resources within the community to close some of the gaps?” This is not so much a plan to make further investments in our schools, as it is a way to maximize our existing investment, and get more value for every dollar we spend. My plan begins and ends with all of us, together as One Providence, determining what we have to offer, and then making that contribution – whether it be time, money, energy, expertise, or just a basic human willingness to help.

The Five-Point Plan
Community schools are by no means some novel creation of mine. There are already models of full service community schools in many cities around the country, including Baltimore, Chicago, Hartford, Tulsa (OK), and Portland (OR). Community schools have proven effective in many of these places; Cincinnati in particular provides an example worth noting. The city launched its Community Learning Centers (community schools) model in 2001, and it is now the top performing urban school district in Ohio. Its high school graduation rates rose from 51% in 2000 to 83% in 2009. Between 2003-2009, the achievement gap between African-American and white students narrowed from 14.5% to 4.3%. In the 2011-2012 school year, over 600 community partners provided over $1 million in services to students and families.
1. **Strategically align our priorities:** We will begin with a district initiative audit and program review. To transition our existing school system into one centered around full service community schools, we must first recognize that our schools are over-goaled and operate under unrealistic expectations. The average school district, especially large urban districts, tries to achieve goals and expectations of anywhere from 70-90 initiatives being implemented simultaneously. Best practice states that no organization should focus on more than three or four at one time. We can’t implement with fidelity or optimize purposeful work until needs are understood and we, as a community, determine what is most important for our students. This will require willingness on behalf of school administrators, as well as the school board, teachers, and parents, to thoroughly assess the efficacy of current initiatives and programs, and discontinue those that are underperforming, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary. Then, we will refocus our efforts around the community school model.

2. **Open the doors to collaboration:** We will open the school doors to community partners who can provide the kinds of wrap-around services and programming we need to both better serve our students, and bring a robust schedule of activity into the schools year-round. We will move more social services, adult education programs, and other wrap-around services into the schools. Many of our children and their families need supports outside the classroom to ensure that children arrive at school ready to learn. These include things like tutoring, ESL classes, health services, after school programs, social services, and much more. By making the school facilities accessible to the broader community, we will create valuable opportunities to provide space for classes, social services, childcare, and other wide ranging services. Everyone will benefit from increased usage and accessibility of the school buildings, and people will feel more of a sense of responsibility to the schools. They will become centers of excellence and sources of pride for entire neighborhoods.

3. **Leverage existing resources:** We will enhance existing partnerships, develop new ones, and repurpose existing resources to bring this model to fruition. Understand that we are not talking about major investments here. Too often we think that the solution to any problem in our schools is to simply throw money at it. The schools need more money for a lot of things, but they also need to use the available resources more strategically. I will leverage our existing resources to repurpose personnel from central administration to on-site coordinators at local schools.

These schools also need common purpose with complementary agencies and institutions, and a culture of collaboration. The School Department already has an Office of Community Partnerships that works with more than 80 nonprofits, businesses, and social services. Groups like the Providence After School Alliance create new programming and opportunities for students, while others, such as City Year and the YMCA provide valuable support networks. Yet these current partnerships could be better coordinated, and there are many more potential partnerships yet to be developed.
These agencies and organizations are already knocking on our doors, asking us to do this work. We will open those doors and let them in.

4. **Establish guidelines for collaboration:** We will make sure that the expectations and responsibilities of our community partners are clearly defined and designed to deliver maximum benefit. Here again we can learn from Cincinnati’s community schools model. They have a clear set of guidelines for their partner agencies (officially known as “Capital Partners”) that maximize the value they bring to the school while minimizing costs to the Cincinnati Public School Department. These guidelines include, “District dollars must be devoted to education”; “Partnerships co-located in the school must be financially self-sustaining”; and, “Capital Partners are financially responsible for design, construction, maintenance, operation, utilities and capital replacement costs for their spaces, dedicated access and parking. CPS retains ownership of the property and building.” We will model our own efforts on these intelligent principles.

4. **Map our needs:** We will conduct a district- and community-wide assessment of our greatest needs to ensure that resources are being directed where they will be most effective. The Seattle school system did this in 2001. Using federal grant money, they were able to survey all the students while guaranteeing anonymity. They analyzed health and social needs by neighborhood and then matched nonprofit services to the needs to eliminate redundancy and duplication. This realignment of student needs and services is still working today, and we will use it as a model for our schools. To implement the findings of this assessment, we will provide school leadership with greater autonomy over programming, partnerships, curriculum, and scheduling, so that we can make sure that resources and needs are connecting as effectively as possible.

5. **Build the framework to address our challenges:** We will use this community schools model to address many of the most important challenges currently facing our school system. Make no mistake: it does not solve all of the problems. What it does is provide an interlocking framework of responsive, decentralized school administration, partner agencies, and community engagement through which we are able to arrive at creative, collaborative solutions to some of our most intractable problems. Community schools are not the solution to these problems – rather, they are environments that foster problem solving through creative collaboration, collective action, and community investment.

Here are only a few examples of the ways that community schools allow us to approach problem solving in new ways and meet the challenges our schools are facing:

**Early Childhood Education**
The achievement gap appears long before kindergarten begins. At-risk children who don’t receive quality education are 25% more likely to drop out of school and 60% less like to attend college. Community schools can expand early learning opportunities for all children; wraparound programming will provide these kinds of resources, particularly for
families that do not have access to quality childcare and preschool programs. We know that learning begins before kindergarten, and we need to develop those learning opportunities for all students. Early childhood education saves money in the long run, as we ensure better development of at-risk students and prepare children to arrive at school ready to learn.

Funding is always going to be an issue in providing more early learning opportunities. While we recognize that the School Department and the City will have to make this more of a budgetary priority, we believe that we can seek state and federal assistance to do this, along with engaging nonprofit agencies and private enterprise in the effort, through our community school model.

**School Funding**
The budget is always a struggle for large urban school systems. As Mayor, I will use my training and experience as an accountant to work with the School Department to ensure that our existing budget is being used effectively, taking care to seek out and address inefficiencies and redundancies. While I would love to simply promise more school funding, we know that this is A) unrealistic, given the City’s current financial state, and B) that simply throwing more money at the schools will not necessarily solve all the problems.

By focusing on an innovative community schools model, however, we can seek out and attract outside funding, whether in the form of federal dollars, grant money, or foundational support. For example, earlier this year the U.S. Department of Education offered a competitive grants program for full service community schools, with awards ranging from $275,000 to $500,000, demonstrating the federal government’s interest in and belief in the effectiveness of this model for our education system.

Many large nonprofits and foundations have also shown a willingness to invest in community schools, including the Coalition for Community Schools, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the JP Morgan Chase Foundation, the Atlantic Philanthropies, and more.

The community schools model also opens new opportunities for funding through specific programs and partnerships. Nonprofits providing services and programming within our schools can include the Providence Public School Department in their own grant proposals. For example, the Providence Full Service Community School Initiative was a program undertaken at five elementary schools in 2008; this was a grant-funded program led not by PPSD, but by the nonprofit agency Dorcas Place.

Further, grants and federal money can be identified for individual programs within community schools such as early childhood learning and arts programming. For instance, the above-mentioned needs assessment conducted in Seattle’s schools was funded by a federal Safe Schools grant of $7 million.
In short, while the community schools model does not guarantee outside funding, it opens up new and more varied opportunities for it. As Mayor, I will work with the School Department, the School Board, State agencies, and community partners to aggressively pursue all avenues for outside funding.

**School Facilities**

Many of our school facilities are outdated, in need of repair, or otherwise unsatisfactory. They need major infrastructure and capital investments, and money is tight. There is no one solution to this, but rather a combined effort of many solutions. I’m not a magician, so I can’t simply make money materialize out of thin air and I won’t promise to — but I *am* an accountant. Again, I will use that training to work with the School Department and School Board to examine the current budget, look for redundancies and inefficiencies, and identify areas in which some spending might be de-prioritized in favor of capital investments. Of course, this will only produce a fraction of the money needed to repair our school facilities.

I will also direct the City’s Chief Innovation Officer, a position that will be created under my City Services Plan, to identify and seek out other sources of funding: state, federal, nonprofit, philanthropic, and even private. Then I will use the Office of the Mayor to aggressively campaign for these funds and develop partnerships to bring them in. Traditional funding sources are no longer sufficient to pay our bills, so we must get creative. There are businesses and philanthropic agencies that would gladly pay for naming rights and other sponsorship opportunities. Trade programs like those within the Providence Career and Technical Academy can be leveraged, so that students can gain credit towards graduation by actually working to improve their school facilities. Public-private partnerships can be forged to help close the funding and resources gaps.

Community engagement will also be a key factor. By opening the school buildings to the community, more people will have more reasons to step inside them. This will not only give them personal experience with the shortcomings of our facilities, but more incentive to become a part of the solution. I suspect that many people who have not set foot inside a public school building since they were students themselves would be spurred to action if they personally experience some of the deplorable conditions our students are forced to endure during the school day. When the entire community is encouraged to view these buildings as their property, their investment, they will rise to the challenge of protecting that investment. The efforts to save and repair Nathan Bishop on the East Side prove that when the community rallies together around its school, the work can get done.

This task won’t be easy, but I will work tirelessly to explore every possible solution — and the community schools model means more people will have the chance to be a part of those solutions.
School Autonomy
In order for each school to become a center of excellence for its community, it must reflect the needs, desires, and challenges of that community, as well as its demographics. In order to achieve this goal, we must give individual schools more autonomy and flexibility within the school system. There must be less top-down, centralized management so that our schools can become more agile and responsive. An initiative that is badly needed in one area of the city may be wasteful or redundant in another; each school should have the autonomy necessary to make those decisions, while still fulfilling its responsibilities to district-wide goals and standards.

In Cincinnati’s community schools model, the primary governing body for each individual school within the system is a Local School Decision Making Committee (LSDMC). This committee is made up of at least 12 members drawn from four distinct stakeholder groups: three each from parents, community members, teachers, and non-teaching school staff, including the principal. We would adopt a similar model for Providence schools, with the addition of equal representation for students on any decision making committees.

Each LSDMC serves a number of important roles:
• adopting bylaws, including the school’s mission and vision
• setting measurable school goals, based on a needs assessment
• developing the school's OnePlan, a broad plan to implement the school's goals
• completing a midyear and end-of-year goal progress report
• making recommendations and approving the school's budget
• participating in the selection of a principal, when a vacancy exists
• approving locally initiated changes in the school’s program or focus
• making recommendations to the principal regarding other school issues
• seeking grants to support the school’s programs (optional)
• coordinating and overseeing the development of the school as a Community Learning Center

Our community schools model will develop similar decision making committees at the individual school level, and charge them with many of the same roles.

Student Resources and Engagement
Our students may not be taking advantage of, or even aware of, the resources available to them. Furthermore, they don’t have an established system to provide feedback to teachers, administrators, and parents. We will create a central hub for students to access opportunities and resources available to them that go beyond the classroom and school day. This will be a place where students can find information on and receive the kinds of services available through wrap-around programming, like tutoring, extracurricular activities, expanded learning opportunities, internships, etc. But it will also be a place where students can offer feedback; share what they learn with teachers, administrators, and parents; and collaborate with teachers, administrators, and other
students to offer student-centered, student-led solutions. Guidance staff and functions can also be incorporated, and even expanded, within this hub.

Too often our students are placed in danger or wind up in trouble because of a lack of after school opportunities, like extracurricular activities, after school programs, jobs, and internships. There are already effective partners like the Providence After School Alliance, New Urban Arts, and many more that provide these kinds of resources and programming to our students. By further incorporating these partners into the schools, and developing and recruiting new partners, and by making the school buildings accessible on nights, weekends, and during vacations, we increase the number of positive, productive options for keeping kids off the streets where they can stay safe and out of trouble. This allows us to provide more sports, arts, and music programming; clubs and interest-based organizations; mentoring and tutoring services; educational resources; and after school events.

Further, by developing partnerships within the business community, and creating more Extended Learning Opportunities, we can connect older high school students to internships and job placements, to get them engaged in developing career skills and making connections now, rather than later.

**Parental Resources and Engagement**

This is crucial to a child’s education, as in many cases, students spend more time with their parents than they do with their teachers. Parents are not being provided with the information they need about their child’s school and education in an easy and accessible manner. Hand in hand with that, we are not using parents as a resource, soliciting their feedback and engaging them in the process of improving our schools. We need a central hub for parent resources, one simple website for information about school schedules, services available to them and their children, transportation, etc. One already exists, but we aim to make it more comprehensive, effective, and easy to navigate. This needs to be easily accessible, and available in English, Spanish, and more.

Furthermore, we must offer greater and more meaningful opportunities for families to provide feedback and input. Parents just entering the school system through kindergarten enrollment will be offered “Ready for Success” training. We must train and empower more involved parents to take on leadership roles and be effective partners for schools, then formalize those roles.

Parents also often need their own education or additional learning resources. Full service community schools can offer ESL and GED classes, as well as job skills training or resume building workshops for parents within the school facility. This is in line with making these buildings available to the community beyond the school day and year. Parents will be more invested in their children’s schools if they are also learning within those same buildings.
Indiana University’s School of Education did a study of the full service community school model enacted in Providence’s Robert L. Bailey Elementary during the 2008-09 school year. They found that increasing educational and engagement opportunities for adults produced benefits for both students and parents: 127 adults participated in at least one of the following: family literacy, wrap-around case management, or family engagement. 134 children participated in at least one of the following: family literacy, wraparound case management, and out of school time programming. 116 parents participated in three or more school based family engagement events. This resulted in 55% fewer incidences of chronic absenteeism among participants than with in the general school population. Children with parents in family literacy had a higher school attendance rate of 97.3%. Meanwhile, 46% of parents in family literacy classes increased the equivalent of two grade levels in reading.

**Sports, Music, and Arts**
Funding for arts and sports programs in schools is always scarce, and can be difficult to prioritize when math and reading scores are not meeting expectations. Fortunately, there is a vast array of nonprofits and outside programs that provide these opportunities to our youth, such as New Urban Arts, Community MusicWorks, Project Night Vision, the Manton Avenue Project, Everett Dance School, Project GOAL, and many more. They are already doing the work of enriching our students with arts education and athletics outside the schools. Community schools allow us to invite them in to do more, and more robust, work with our students, and open up new grant funding opportunities by institutionalizing their programming within the school district.

**Diversity in Hiring**
If community schools are to be centers of excellence for their respective neighborhoods, it logically follows that their staff and faculty should be reflective of those neighborhoods. By assessing the needs of individual communities and directing resources to meet those needs, we are also better able to prioritize diversity in our hiring practices. Identifying schools that contain large populations of particular ethnic backgrounds allows us to pay more attention to finding teachers and support staff that speak the language and are familiar with the values of those communities.

We will create a cohort to recruit and train teachers from our own communities, similar to the way City Hall’s Mayoral Fellowship program develops future public servants. Chicago’s Grow Your Own Teachers Initiative offers one model for how we can achieve this. This program identifies, trains, and employs teachers from low income communities in their own neighborhood schools. Through partnerships with community colleges, public and private universities, community organizations, school districts, and unions, the initiative identifies candidates from low income areas with hard-to-staff schools and provides them with forgivable loans, financial aid, and childcare in exchange for a minimum five-year commitment to teach in those schools. This results in a homegrown, diverse pool of qualified, motivated teachers with direct ties to the
communities they serve. What's even more interesting is that this initiative was created by parents of children in these schools, and organized through a nonprofit neighborhood association.

PPSD already has a contract with Teach for America to recruit and place teachers in underserved schools, but these teachers are drawn from all over the country and only make a two-year commitment. Surely we can adjust our funding and recruitment priorities to make the same kind of investment in homegrown teachers. We must develop diverse community schools that reflect the fabric of their communities, and I will work with the School Department to prioritize this.

**Teaching Nonviolence and Reducing School Suspensions**

Opening the our school doors more fully to more community partners allows us to deal with school violence and disciplinary problems in more holistic, less punitive ways. Agencies like the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence and Project Night Vision provide valuable programming, resources, and expertise that can be better leveraged by closer partnerships with community schools. Similarly, social service agencies and behavioral health programs operating within our schools will provide not only the knowledge and resources, but also the human capital necessary to move away from school suspensions in response to disciplinary incidents. Our schools cannot truly benefit our children if the students are not in attendance.

**What’s Next?**

Adopting the community schools model is ultimately about making our schools more agile, responsive, and better able to serve the needs of our students. They will be innovative centers of creative learning, with values and priorities that reflect the future awaiting our students. To re-envision the form and function of our schools without also re-envisioning the content of our curricula and the methods of our assessments is to leave the job half done. In my next release, I will outline my vision for reinventing the “one size fits all approach” to learning that persists in our schools.