

The Elorza Vision for Education

Pt. 2: Creating a system of multiple pathways for authentic learning, real world skill development, and student achievement



Standing in front of my alma mater, Classical High School

In my last release, I outlined my vision for full service community schools with wrap-around programming. This model of providing a broad-ranging menu of services to students and families through community partnerships will make each school building a center of excellence for its neighborhood beyond the school day, and even the school year. It will also encourage us all to be active stakeholders in our school system, even when we don't have a direct connection. While this model is not a solution to all of our educational challenges, it does provide a framework through which we can invite all invested parties to work on creative, collaborative solutions.

If we're going to re-envision the purpose and usage of our school buildings, then it logically follows that we must also re-envision the way our students are learning within them.

Our educational system still essentially functions on the framework we built generations ago, for a very different version of American society. The world has changed, and the world that awaits the next generation will change even more rapidly, yet we are still

structuring the education of our students in very much the same way their great-grandparents were taught. We need a thorough overhaul of curriculum and assessments that aligns with the skills needed for our children's futures. We need an approach that recognizes that all children are not identical; that there are various types of intelligence, some of which cannot simply be measured through standardized testing; and that learning can happen in more places than seated at a desk in a classroom.

I will lead the effort to change this. I can't do it alone. I will work with the Providence Public School Department, the Providence Teachers Union, the Providence School Board, student based organizations, parents, the City Council, the Rhode Island Department of Education, the State House, institutions of higher education, and other national and local leaders in education and job creation, to bring proven practices of



high performing urban schools and the skills gap reduction to our district. In fact, this very vision statement is a testament to that: it is not the work of one man who thinks he has all the answers. It is the generous collective effort of many stakeholders – including classroom teachers, students, parents, school leaders, experts working in innovative areas of education, and more – who shared with me their stories, ideas, opinions, advice, input, criticisms, and recommendations to

inform this vision. I know this work will not be easy and changing the expectations of our school leaders will take time, but our children deserve the best opportunities for academic success and on this I will not waiver.

I will work to create a learning environment with multiple graduation pathways that stretch from one side of the city to the other. We must create real world learning opportunities that prepare our children for the jobs of today and tomorrow. To create such learning environments, we will bring the community together to collaborate: educational leaders, higher education institutions, nonprofits, and businesses. Creating these real world opportunities will allow our students' interests and skills to drive their learning while they develop the cognitive, technical, and soft skills to be well prepared for life after high school.

The challenges are clear:

- We must offer access to Advanced Placement classes, as well as career and technical courses, starting in middle school.

- We must align our curriculum and assessment standards with real world of today and the future.
- We must give teachers and school leaders more autonomy to create curriculum based on student interest and ability.
- We must expand Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO), so that all students can take part in unique, enrichment based learning opportunities.
- We must change the conversation and accept that the “one size fits all” method of educating and assessing students is no longer sufficient

We owe it to our students and to our city to prepare every child for the future, to empower and engage them in the learning process. The development of a multiple pathways system allows students to take ownership of their learning. This more personalized approach to learning has proven to increase student engagement and overall academic achievement. It better prepares students for post secondary college and meaningful, high paying careers. We should never forget that our students are not robots; they are our city's most treasured resource and we must respect their different needs, talents, interests, and abilities. My vision for education is based on the fundamental belief that every one of our children has the capacity to be great, and it is our duty to reach them.



Moving In the Right Direction

First, it must be recognized that we are already starting to create an environment of collaboration and innovation in Providence. I will build upon the Providence School Board's and District's initiative to decentralize central administration and build a system of school based management. It is time now to put these conversations into action and empower those staff members that are closest to the students. Principals, teachers, and school support staff must be the primary focus to determine what is best for students. I promise to accelerate the new system of management and work closely with the District and Board to create policies and procedures that empower schools while holding them accountable for student achievement.

I also believe we need to explore more opportunities to create smaller, innovative elementary, middle, and high schools. Here again, Providence is moving in this direction. On July 24, it was announced that Providence won a \$3 million grant by the Carnegie Corporation as part of its Opportunity By Design Challenge. This grant will

fund the creation of two small, innovative high schools in Providence, which will launch in the 2015-2016 school year. The two schools will reside within existing PPSD buildings and will be open to all PPSD students through the school choice process, serving a student population representative of the district as a whole. They will be modeled on Carnegie's "10 integrated principles to meet the demands of the Common Core," which recommend things like, "Multiple opportunities for students to show mastery through performance-based assessments," and "Instruction in a variety of learning modalities, linked to students' strengths and learning goals."

Creating educational pathways built on mastery-based learning allows student passions to drive learning opportunities that are meaningful and of value to them while developing the skills and competencies required for success. Student progress will be assessed regularly. These assessments will be used to guide and inform growth and development so that teachers can alter instruction to meet the needs of each student, and students can map their own success and create their own benchmarks along the learning process. Students themselves will have access to their assessment results so that they can focus on individual needs and aspirations based on a personal learning plan. Students and teachers will work together to map out results, set adjustments and identify learning goals and objectives – measuring how tasks and behaviors change during the learning process.

The Next Steps

As Mayor, I will ensure that we continue moving toward this environment of collaboration and innovation, and that we are creating this system of multiple pathways. These are the action steps we will take to achieve that:

We will provide students with more opportunities to master skills at their own pace

We must move to a competency-based educational system, rather than a system based on seat-time or time-based systems. A competency-based approach allows for greater flexibility within our education system and leads to better student engagement. Competency-based learning will also help build multiple pathways to graduation, including online and blended learning education, project-based learning, and credit recovery.

Test after test shows that our students' knowledge of English, math, and science is below the national and state averages, and far from acceptable. Students routinely finish elementary school without knowing how to read proficiently or do their multiplication tables. They routinely finish middle school without the prerequisites for doing high school work, and they routinely graduate from high school unprepared academically for college or a skilled vocation. This is partly because Providence students come from a myriad of backgrounds and start out at different learning levels, even as early as kindergarten. (This further demonstrates the importance of recognizing that learning begins before school.) Subsequently, they progress through school at

different rates – some learn math more quickly, some learn English more quickly. We must recognize these differences and offer solutions that embrace these various learning styles as opposed to forcing students to conform to more traditional structures of learning.

I believe the Common Core requirements have provided useful objectives that all our children must reach, but these are merely indicators of student achievement. We must not rely solely on Common Core and NECAP as indicators of success. Common Core will still be our benchmark, but we need to change our idea about when and how students reach those goals. For example, instead of saying that all eighth graders must learn algebra, we must determine what they need to learn prior to learning algebra and make sure that students learn it. We will clearly define what students need to learn in order to pass to the next level, and we will stop promoting them simply because they are one year older. We will work to ensure that when they move forward, it's because they're genuinely ready and not because of social promotion.

We will transition to a competency-based approach to education by working with classroom teachers and administrators on a set of clear, measurable goals, with the tools and procedures in place for tracking student progress. We will commit to the worthwhile difficulty of managing flexible time schedules and flexible student groupings. We can afford nothing less than the reality of having all students graduate only when they are able to demonstrate the mastery of a set of competencies aligned with state standards.

Within this approach, we will be able to provide students with the time they need to engage in authentic learning. However, we also have to recognize that some students need *less* time. Advanced students are also not provided with enough opportunities to develop at the right pace. We will expand their options with dual enrollment and more Advanced Placement (AP) classes.

As part of dual enrollment, students have the opportunity to take college courses while still in high school, earning both high school and college credits. Dual enrollment (part of many early college high schools) allows students to graduate with both a high school degree and an associate's degree. Furthermore, the experience gained on a college campus as a high school student allows the development of social and academic skills required for success in both college and career. Similarly, AP courses within our schools provide students with both high school and college credits, and we will ensure that more students are able to access these opportunities in more subjects.

Providence's universities are a tremendous source of knowledge and opportunity for high school students as well; we will work with them to develop dual enrollment opportunities. We will collaborate and establish partnerships to support this kind of enrollment and credit transfer, setting clear standards and metrics to ensure that the courses offered meet the standards of both high school and college credits.

We will place creativity, innovation, and critical thinking at the forefront of learning

We have a healthy base of community partnerships and Extended Learning Opportunities in Providence; as Mayor, I will increase the development of and access to these and other opportunities for collaboration and developing creative solutions. Students will have greater freedom and ability to focus on student-designed independent studies, work studies, and internships. This will provide them with crucial knowledge, experience, and skill development that goes beyond the traditional curriculum, and allow them to develop connections in the community outside the classroom. We know, for example, that a student who does an internship at a local business is more likely to remain in the community after graduation – we will foster those kinds of connections. These learning opportunities will empower students and increase their willingness to connect curriculum with their personal passions; research shows that these activities help students develop intrinsic “soft skills” around communication, goal management, and relationship building – all key 21st century skills that employers are seeking. These have taken a back seat to increased attention on the skills needed for standardized testing, yet all the research demonstrates that these non-academic skills are the ones businesses look for in future employees.

We will engage the business community in providing the kinds of outside-the-classroom learning opportunities that schools cannot. ELOs and internships help students develop the kind of real world skills and experiences they will need later in life, and better prepare them for higher education and careers. Furthermore, the business community can provide valuable insight to help better prepare our children for the future. We must partner with them to increase opportunities for our students and create a dynamic relationship between the business community and our educational system.

We also recognize that not all opportunities for developing creativity, innovation, and critical thinking are to be found outside of the classroom. Educators will be given the flexibility and charge to shape their curriculum to address these needs and also better prepare students for ELOs. This flexibility should also be extended to administrators, not only to support curricular adjustments, but also provide flexible scheduling.

We will develop ways to assess authentic learning that go beyond standardized tests

We have seen the effects of a “teaching to the test” environment. If we are to embrace the notion that a “one size fits all” style of education does not best serve our students, then we must also recognize that a “one size fits all” curriculum does not best serve our teachers. Teachers will have more freedom and flexibility to develop individualized learning plans for students and to offer extended and non-traditional learning opportunities that go beyond textbooks. Our school department will provide the support necessary to make this happen.

In 2003, the Rhode Island Board of Regents passed new regulations that require high school students to “graduate by proficiency” by demonstrating achievement in standards-based content as well as applied learning skills. These “diploma assessments” include exhibitions, portfolios, and certificates of initial mastery, or end-of-course assessments designed to demonstrate mastery. PASA (Providence After School Alliance) has worked with schools to pilot various credit-bearing ELOs that reinforce the idea of applied learning.

For too long, student readiness has been hampered, in part, by an underlying education system that dictates inputs such as the amount of time students are required to complete a course (“seat-time”). Rhode Island has been identified by the Carnegie Foundation as a Category 2 state where districts define credits and may use seat-time or another measure (e.g. proficiency or competency) to award credit in core courses. As Mayor, I will revisit these options so that we are able to structure learning in a way that benefits each student. Full potential can’t be realized until the focus shifts from time-based inputs to student learning outputs tied to the mastery of content and skills.

We will develop more and better connections between K-12 and higher education

Finally, in order to properly prepare our students for college, we will engage the universities in our backyard and leverage the resources these institutions can provide. We will develop more partnerships between K-12 and higher education institutions. Students, teachers, parents, and the community can gain from their involvement in our K-12 system. We will draw upon them for professional development, mentoring, extended learning opportunities, advocacy, leadership, planning, and more. For example, high school language programs could partner with higher education language departments to provide college credit for real world experience like translating documents, or live interpretation at school meetings.

Conclusion

Creating this system of multiple pathways will not be easy, and no one person or institution could ever unilaterally achieve it. However, I believe that one of the Mayor’s most important roles is to outline a vision, then rally the stakeholders and resources necessary to make it a reality. This is what I will do in order to better serve our students, and to develop a system that allows them to explore their unique passions and skill sets. Just as the Providence Public Schools were my pathway to a better life, I want to make sure the next generation has those same opportunities – and that those opportunities are aligned with the future that awaits them. Our children deserve nothing less than our most vigorous efforts to achieve this. In my next and final release on education, I will outline some of the more nuts-and-bolts functional approaches I will take to ensure success.

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