

December 16, 2011

Dear PHSSA Family and Community,

I have served on the PHSSA Board of Directors since June 2010 and became president September 2010. I got involved because I had read in the media about the relationship between the founding PHSSA board members and RPS school board members. I thought, because I had worked for RPS for 35 years, I could bring an experienced educational perspective to the PHSSA board and help bond the relationship with RPS better. Also, my career with RPS started when administrators and school board members looked for innovative ways to educate children. I thought that the vision for PHSSA was just one more example of providing a unique choice for our children in Richmond.

I began my career at John B. Cary School when it provided instruction that was very similar to PHSSA in that we taught using themes via an integrated curriculum. Additionally, RPS continued to bring innovation to our schools by providing alternative choices for students through programs such as Open High, Community High, and Franklin Military. The leadership of those school board members and administrators who led the charge for these schools is the reason why I was proud to work for an innovative school system that was serious about providing education for Richmond's diverse population.

By now, you have probably received a letter from Ms. Kimberly Bridges, chair of Richmond Public School Board. The PHSSA Board of Directors strongly disagrees with the concerns that Ms. Bridges outlined in her letter, and I regret that the letter was sent to you before the PHSSA Board had an opportunity to respond to those concerns. Despite Ms. Bridges' letter, I want to emphasize that RPS's administrators and staff members have demonstrated how a Local Education Authority (LEA) is supposed to work collaboratively with a charter school. Their support has been outstanding. Their attitude towards us has been professional and courteous.

The progress that PHSSA has made in a very short amount of time is nothing short of amazing. PHSSA is just days from completing phase 1 of renovations of the Patrick Henry School building, a 90 plus year old building with ADA and life safety updates. Our board members are working almost around the clock to ensure that our children are getting into this building by the time they return to school on Jan. 9th.

Our students and our staff have also worked extremely hard to ensure the success of this school.

- The academic outcomes of our school are incredible. PHSSA received passing SOL scores based on the 2010-2011 school year. PHSSA had a very small testing population of only 15 third graders, 12 fourth graders, and six fifth graders. Despite the low testing population of only 33 children, PHSSA students scored **97 percent in mathematics, outscoring the state by 10 points.** Students scored 92 in English, again outscoring the state. Additionally, PHSSA students scored 83% in both history and science. **The fourth graders scored 100% in both reading and mathematics.** The school met AYP, and Dr. Brandon confirmed this in a letter dated Nov. 14, 2011.
- Our school is nearing the end of a half million dollar renovation project on a city-owned building. We have been successful with Phase 1 because of thousands of dollars in private and government funds. Private donations were given for both instruction and renovation because the larger Richmond Community desires to seek change and educational improvement for the sake of our children.
- Last school year, RPS saw an increase in enrollment numbers by 460 students. Almost a third of that can be directly attributed to PHSSA.
- In our first year of operation, we received a clean audit from Dixon, Hughes, and Goodman. Our Board recently voted (on 11/15) to have Hardy, Harris, Johnstone conduct our audit for year ending June 30, 2011.

Ms. Bridges' letter details other concerns of RPS board. However, some of the information in the letter is unfortunately, not entirely correct.

- Ms. Bridges states that in June 2011 the PHSSA Board received advance notice of the upcoming compliance review. Although the letter was dated June 2011, the PHSSA Board did not receive the letter until July 2011. Once the PHSSA Board received the letter, we responded promptly, providing the requested documentation in August 2011.
- Mrs. Bridges also states, "Throughout the Compliance Review process, RPS administration provided ongoing administrative support to PHSSA, including training and consultation, as well as technical assistance to remedy the deficiencies in academics and operations." While this statement implies that RPS provided support for the compliance review, that is not the case. During the summer, RPS administrators provided excellent support to our Board for personnel matters, but not support related to the compliance review.

Financial Accountability and Sustainability

- I must disagree with Ms. Bridges' statement that PHSSA's financial reporting has not been consistent and has been repeatedly incorrect. In truth, PHSSA has

consistently submitted financial reports to the School Board each quarter, per the conditions in the charter.

- Mrs. Bridges also states that PHSSA has had significant turnover of volunteer treasurers, implying that this turnover has adversely affected PHSSA's financial reporting and accountability. Again that is not the case. First, PHSSA has had only four treasurers in more than five years of its existence. Each of those treasurers performed in an outstanding manner and devoted substantial time and effort to ensuring that PHSSA's financial affairs have been in order and that their duties were properly transferred to their successor. There has been absolutely no negative impact on PHSSA's financial affairs relating to PHSSA's treasurers – and Ms. Bridges' letter does not point to any such impact. PHSSA's treasurers have done nothing less than an outstanding job, but they are volunteers and each has had individual and personal reasons for leaving that position when they did and their departures have not affected PHSSA's financial soundness in any way.
- Ms. Bridges states that PHSSA committed to raise \$300,000 in the 2010-2011 school year, and we failed to do that. Again, I must respectfully disagree. In a letter dated October 13, 2010, we explained how the school had raised \$463,000 in grants and donations for FY 2010 – 11. The letter goes on to explain how PHSSA is anticipating a surplus at the end of the operating year to use for debt services.
- Ms. Bridges makes reference to a “second loan” to have enough funds to complete the Phase 1 construction. Unfortunately, Ms. Bridges omits the full context of that loan. The second loan for construction is a short-term bridge loan until PHSSA receives funds from the Historic Tax credits related to the renovations. These tax credits have always been included in the projected budget for the Phase 1 renovations. The PHSSA Board anticipates carrying about \$100,000 in bridge loan for a maximum of six months until the tax credits are received.

Innovative and Integrated Curriculum

- PHSSA did commit to offering a comprehensive and integrated curriculum with a focus on science and arts. Contrary to the statements in Ms. Bridges' letter, PHSSA does offer an integrated science and arts curriculum. You know this because your children experience that curriculum every day.

- Mrs. Bridges states “RPS administrators are now working with PHSSA teachers to develop a curriculum by July 2012.” This statement may give the false impression that RPS administrators are assisting us with writing the curriculum, which is not the case. PHSSA’s interim principals are providing leadership with writing the curriculum, and. PHSSA staff is working in teams to develop the curriculum in a format in which RPS is familiar. The teachers have been using some off the shelf curricula mixed with their own innovative and creative ideas – all based on the SOLs. PHSSA will be using its curriculum as a model for other schools in the State that wish to bring together scientific investigation and arts. The method of writing and teaching, experimenting and changing the curriculum is common in innovative and progressive educational environments. The Albemarle Community Public Charter School follows a similar model.
- At our last State of the School meeting, which was held Dec. 6th, our interim principal told the parents that the curriculum is being implemented and the children are learning in the way the charter states. Additionally, our teachers are dedicated to this method of teaching, which is why they were drawn to our school. That PHSSA has delivered on its commitment to institute an innovative and effective science and arts curriculum is perhaps best demonstrated by the school’s results as shown in its test scores.

Conclusion

As should be expected with any new endeavor, PHSSA has had challenges in its short existence, but it has met and overcome each challenge with hard work and commitment from a volunteer board, staff, and parents. Again, the PHSSA Board strongly disagrees with the criticisms in Ms. Bridges’ letter, and we deeply regret the difficult relationship and adversarial tone that the School Board has chosen to take. The PHSSA Board remains committed, however, to continue to work with the School Board and RPS to meet the challenges in Ms. Bridges’ letter in the same way we have met the challenges that have come before.

I want to personally thank each of you for all you do for the Patrick Henry School of Science and Arts, and I need to ask you to continue to support our school.

Parents and Community, we need you. We need you to step up and to ensure that we have the necessary funds, manpower, and innovative thinking to fulfill the vision that made PHSSA possible. We can do this!! Immediately, we need you to:

- Voice your opinion to your elected representatives on the School Board and City Council and tell them why you chose this school for your child.
- Volunteer in the next two weeks to help us move into the building.

My contact information is 780-1627 or 615-8751 (cell) or Sharon.burton@patrickhenrycharter.org. Kristen Larson's contact information is 503-1313 or Kristen.larson@patrickhenrycharter.org

Lastly and most importantly, I wish for you a happy holiday and a prosperous New Year.

With all my love,

Sharon Burton

Sharon Burton
PHSSA President