

November 6, 2018

## An Open Letter to Families

Some of you have either been following, reached out to your school or the network or otherwise shared your thoughts about our ongoing union contract negotiations. Nearly all comments shared revolve around doing all we can to keep negotiations going to avoid a strike. Your Acero Schools leadership won't be walking away from the table.

To be clear, we have great teachers and school-based staff. These professionals work hard each and every day and love your children. I also know that our non-unionized staff across Acero Schools also deeply care about you and your children. All are good and decent people working in service to our students.

Our first school opened 20 years ago offering a neighborhood school alternative to our community. Our schools were born of our public – a public too often underserved. And so I am offended by any suggestion that our schools are part of an effort to undermine public education. We exist as a public option for you and your children. We are authorized by a public body and our finances, audits and activities exist in the sunshine.

Since having the privilege of becoming CEO of Acero Schools, I have focused on 1) maintaining and growing strong academic outcomes and student services 2) getting back in solid financial shape so that our students and schools can thrive 3) fighting for resources so we can continue to offer competitive compensation for our teams and provide even more offerings for our students and 4) further aligning our schools' focus so that we continue to mirror the students and communities that we serve. I'm proud of what we've achieved – every single member of the Acero Schools team has played a vital role. Every one of us in this organization, including me, can and must focus on continuous improvement. We have the talent and ability to do this and I am unrelenting in keeping our focus on being better because, when we do better, our kids do better.

There are outside influencers doing what they have always done to charter schools in Illinois – they are vilifying, dehumanizing and undermining our legitimacy. It's meant to hurt, confuse and it's a tired political tactic.

I have heard some upsetting claims that Acero Schools senior leadership 'doesn't care about immigration' and 'does not prioritize diversity or ethnic inclusion'. Acero Schools made clear our [immigration position](#) in 2017. That position hasn't changed. The senior leadership of your network is 83% minority, 67% Latina/o and 50% female. Your team includes people born and raised in Chicago and in border communities. Many of us are the children of immigrants and have dedicated our careers to serving the underserved, immigrants, undocumented students, non-traditional students and those working hard to emerge from real difficulty. We prioritize



service to community non-profits because it's what we believe in. We came from hard working families that made sacrifices for us and our country so that we could do the work we do today. We see ourselves in your children because we are so much like your children and you are so much like our own families.

Enough of this discussion has revolved around claims that include no context and count on you not asking questions or for verification. To our family – including students, parents and colleagues – the proof is in the outcomes.

We will continue to make readily available information on matters that we know you care about deeply. Our goal remains unchanged – we seek to honor our commitments to students and families and treat our educators and professionals with respect and fairness by affording colleagues competitive wages and benefits. We will do so balancing the needs of our students, teachers and staff in service to your family and Acero Schools.

Somos Acero,  
Richard L. Rodriguez

## Just the Facts

### **Some have stated, “Charter schools are failing charter students.”**

87% of Acero Schools are Level 1/1+. And for those that aren't – we won't rest until they are.

- 55% of all CPS schools are Level 1/1+.

### **Some have suggested that we refuse to pay our teachers a competitive wage.**

- Within two years [2016 to 2018] – the average salary of an Acero Schools teacher increased by 6.7% from \$60,495 to \$65,009.
  - We aren't the Chicago Public Schools, we don't have a \$6 billion dollar annual budget or the financial backing of the City of Chicago.
  - Our teachers do amazing work – they also aren't a mirror image of CPS' teacher profile. Many haven't taught as long as an average CPS teacher.
- Acero's starting salary is actually more than what CPS pays [\$50,160 vs. \$49,660]. We also offer outstanding health benefits, more breaks during the school year, and more teacher preparatory time. We also do not require our teachers to live in Chicago, if we did, 30% of our teachers would have to move.

### **Some have suggested that we require teachers to work unreasonable hours.**

- Our mission is transforming minds through academic empowerment and success. Our vision is providing educational opportunities that will launch the next generation of extraordinary life-long learners, discerners and doers. Our mission and vision provide a guidepost for what we do.
- Our philosophy from the very beginning as public charter schools was to do more with what we have in radical service of students. We believe that this means offering more instructional time in an 8-hour work day and more school-based time for kids. We believe time in school is critical and sacred. And, as public servants, this is required of all Acero colleagues – unionized or non-unionized.

### **Some have suggested that we could easily reduce class sizes by not accepting students from our waitlist – even though some have waited for a spot for months.**

- We have some of the strongest academic outcomes in the city with 32 students in a classroom. We won't fail to honor the commitment we've made to students waiting to join our family of schools and we refuse to end the educational promise we made to approximately 1,500 current Acero Schools students to meet an arbitrary reduction in classroom size.

### **Some have suggested that Acero Schools has a “30, 40, 50 percent turnover [vacancy] rate” suggesting that our teachers don't remain in the network.**

- In the 2017-2018 school year, between 19-21% of school-based staff exited the network. Doubling the turnover rate for a soundbite is intentionally dishonest.
- This is a challenge for all of K-12 education. Not so long ago, nearly 50% of new teachers nationwide exited the profession within their first five years of teaching. This has gone down nationwide and it's why Acero Schools is focused on reasonably increasing salaries, maintaining benefits and a positive school culture.

**Some have suggested that Acero Schools doesn't care to invest in adequate play space for our students.**

- What you're not being told is, for the K-8 school buildings that Acero Schools owns – all have playgrounds. Where we have challenges that require innovative solutions are the properties that we lease. We cannot build on property we do not own or where there is inadequate space for a traditional playground.
- Lacking a traditional playground doesn't mean children don't experience organized and thoughtful indoor and outdoor play. We have portable play and recess equipment and are constantly looking for new ways to address a challenge shared by urban districts with space limits.

**Some have implied that we prioritize having an office downtown over serving and being in our communities.**

- A subset of our team is located downtown because it's centrally located and accessible to all of our schools that cover an expansive geography as north as Rogers Park and southwest to Gage Park. This location is also close to CPS and other partners we work with on a regular basis and allows us to get to and from important meetings efficiently and in optimal service to our schools. This office is accessible to public transit so that people, including colleagues and visitors, can get to and from their homes and our 15 school communities. This office is not "fancy" or "extravagant" – we intentionally leased this location to get our work done in the greatest service to our students and all of our schools.

**Some have implied that our funds go to "boardrooms and not classrooms".**

- We are a public non-profit with a governing board that is entirely voluntary. Board members are in no way compensated for any of their service. They do however and without hesitation, lend their diverse professional expertise as educators, education policy experts, clinicians, lawyers, business owners, financial professionals, city planners and parents to our network. We are grateful for their service.