OPEN LETTER TO BOARD OF GRAND RAPIDS PUBLIC SCHOOLS:

The public school system is under attack as never before in the United States, led primarily by conservative ideologues, like Betsy DeVos, who are fundamentally opposed to public education. Commensurate with the public school demise is the fact that Betsy's beloved and long sought-after voucher penchant has gotten new synergy as witnessed in the recent 6-3 Supreme Court decision in the Carson v Makin case. This paves the way for public funds to flow to private religious schools! The decision will no doubt expand voucher programs across the nation, undermining public schools and the students they serve. Likewise, closer to home, the Michigan Supreme Court voted to uphold MCL 388.1752b, which approves public funding for private school mandates. This chips away at the clear language held in the Constitution of the State of Michigan which clearly states, unequivocally, that direct or indirect financial aid with public money is prohibited to all non-public schools.

Grand Rapids for Education Justice (GREJ) specifically warned GRPS years ago of the damaging consequences of the district's public/business partnerships, chartering the charter private Discovery school, privatizing its many intrinsic educational components (e.g. busing, etc), purchasing private curriculum, and, most worrisome, continuing a cozy shared policy relationship with Betsy Devos.

These are policies which we traced directly to Betsy's deregulated neoliberal free-for-all business model for privatizing education. It was easy to see the effects which resulted from a kinship so warm that the GRPS superintendent was proud to be invited to attend Betsy's confirmation hearings, her and her entourage all expenses paid. The only superintendent invited in the entire country! There are specific steps GRPS could have taken, but didn't, to combat privatization, and we are all seeing their failure is resulting in the closure of neighborhood buildings and diminished enrollment.

Is it surprising to hear of GRPS closing buildings when we see the private charter school's enrollment spiking and influence proliferating?

Is it surprising to hear presently of a large number of parents in this district having to drive their children to school as the outsourced private busing company fails repeatedly to provide basic service?

Is it not amazing a charter school sitting in a building that sits within our district was sold to them by GRPS? That sale was to Grand Rapids Child Discovery Center at a bargain price! That charter has its own district within the GRPS district, with its own superintendent receiving money for over 300 students who should be attending GRPS. Imagine GRPS chartering that school, and then complaining of shrinking student numbers! The past GRPS relationship with DeVos is indicative of the board's blind naiveté to privatization, and we see little change.
In addition, we are equally dismayed to learn of the district’s continued and chronic inability to fill teaching positions. Granted, this is a national problem stemming from an epidemic, conservative legislation (including arresting teachers for teaching history), burnout, lack of administrative backup, etc. However, we must remember there was a shortage, prior to the COVID pandemic, elucidated by the GREJ!

It was stressed at that time that the utmost reason for teacher shortage based on provided and submitted data was compensation. Similar data submitted to the board showed unequivocally that GRPS had the highest paid administration in Kent County while the teachers were the lowest paid.

Even more data established that teachers are the most vital and impactful cog in the educational milieu, and thus should receive compensation indicative and commensurate with other professional careers! Rather, the district’s current 7% proposed pay increase is beyond paltry as it doesn’t even keep pace with inflation, which is obviously not a pay increase in real spendable dollars.

It is our understanding that 100 classrooms in the GR district were without certified teachers on the 1st day of school. We would remind the board of data supplied 4 years ago showing an inordinate and shameful number of classrooms staffed by full time subs.

This letter is not an “I told you so” attempt, but rather a PLEA to stem the PROPENSITY of public school DENIGRATION.

Other critical issues we stressed earlier, such as educational equity for minority students, are still issues which need to see much improvement. At this critical moment, though, with the very existence of public schools being threatened, we want to focus on the scourge of privatization, as well as ensuring our teachers are receiving the pay and benefits that are needed to attract and retain them in order to give our city’s young people an education in which they can thrive.

We trust these realities will move GR leaders concerned with Public School continuance!

Sincerely,

Jack Prince
Tony Jacobs
in cooperation with members of Grand Rapids for Education Justice (GREJ)