

Dear All:

As principals, you have tremendous power to shape the hearts and minds of your students and the staff members who work in your buildings. Because you possess this power, you have critical roles to play in advancing our public education system and implementing our shared vision, mission and goals. In fact, you are key to helping to make Rockford schools the schools of first choice in our community.

In the very near future, you will be called upon to defend your actions and decisions at the building-level. It is likely that you will also be expected to justify and re-articulate your school's (as well as the District's) strategies for providing students with a world-class education and warm, nurturing learning environments.

It is for this reason that I am sending you a copy of a memo, which was sent by the exclusive representatives of our various bargaining units urging their members to mount a letter writing campaign in an attempt to sway the Board of Education.

The purpose of this letter-writing campaign is to take us off course. When you read the memo, do not become upset or fearful. Use whatever emotions the memo may stir in you to sharpen your focus on your work in service of children.

With that said, you should prepare to refute the claims and allegations that are likely to emerge. Remember that you are charged with the management of your buildings, and the anticipated grievances – even if they are manufactured – reflect on our leadership at all levels.

As you will see when you read the memo, the union representatives are offering a sample letter and urging their members to present complaints in three areas: student discipline, “collaboration in the development of programs, policies and procedures” and “fair and prompt settlement of contracts.”

If you are watching the disciplinary cases before the Board, you know that students who commit serious violations face very serious consequences. Encouraging teachers to employ positive behavior reinforcements to keep students in school for minor transgressions in no way equates to being lax on discipline. One strategy does not preclude the other; when done correctly, they complement each other.

As for collaborating with the unions, the Instructional Council and the Communications Council are just two of the available vehicles for promoting collaboration between the REA and the administration. As a matter of fact, we brought to the Communications Council an invitation last month for teachers to join a number of work groups to review and enhance a wide range of District operations. We have also been working with the REA on the Race to the Top submission. In fact, our partnership with the REA in pursuit of Race to the Top funding is our pledge to work with teachers to enact the education reforms that we know will become the national standard.

The partnership is our vow to jointly pursue accountability and data-driven measures that will improve student achievement, graduation rates and college readiness. We have been transparent and reached out to the REA every step of the way. As you know, many of the curriculum and professional development initiatives were in place or in the works before we sat down to memorialize our collaboration with Race to the Top.

The issue is not a lack of collaboration; it is the fact that the District's primary focus is doing what is in the best interest of students, while the focus of the REA is doing what's best for their members. This brings us to the real reason underlying the unions' solicitation of letters – namely, contract negotiations.

We are presently in contract negotiations with four of the seven unions who represent our employees. There is

a strong possibility that we will have a contract with two of these unions by the end of February. However, the contracts with the REA, the RBMA and the bus drivers expire at the end of this school year. It is because the REA is posturing for upcoming negotiations that its leadership is soliciting letters from members. Simply put, the REA and the other unions are attempting to gain some leverage in the bargaining sessions to come.

We must stay on course. We cannot allow the REA focus and goals to become the focus and goals of the District.

I stand by you as you push to improve student achievement in a diverse urban population. The road is often not smooth, but we will arrive at our destination if we remain focused on what is good and right for children.

Respectfully,

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Superintendent

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