



MEDIA BRIEFING TO AREA NEWS MEDIA

CONTACT: Tina Nilsen-Hodges, Principal, Superintendent, New Roots Charter School
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WHO: Jason Hamilton, Chair of the Board of Trustees, New Roots Charter School
Tina Nilsen-Hodges, Principal, Superintendent of New Roots Charter School
Rudy Blackman, Dean of Students, New Roots Charter School

WHAT: New Roots Charter School to share evidence of strong community support, address budget issues, and issue statement about ICSD response

WHERE: Women's Community Building Library

WHEN: Today, Friday April 10th at 11:00 a.m.

WHY: New York State lawmakers approved the Charter Schools Act in 1998 to provide families with expanded public school choice. Our region has been awarded a charter because of evidence of need and parental demand for alternatives. It's essential that families in our region have accurate information about charter schools and New Roots Charter School in particular in order to be fully informed about their legal right to pursue this option.

The ICSD is an excellent district for many students, but there are far too many that are not thriving, and far too many tax dollars expended for students who are failing because their needs are not being met. The district's passing rates on Regents exams and graduation rates for students of color and those that are disadvantaged economically is shockingly low. It's time for the ICSD to recognize that there's a new public high school in the region and to respond responsibly, recognizing that New Roots is part of a nationwide initiative in public education that addresses the very problems that are currently putting our economy under tremendous strain.

HOW: It is time for all those involved in education to put their differences aside and work together to ensure that the needs of every child are met. The leadership of New Roots School is prepared to do just that.



April 10, 2009

FROM THE DESK OF *Rudy Blackman*
Dean of Students, New Roots Charter School

I am pleased to be able to announce that we have posted the names of over 1,000 community members who endorse New Roots Charter School to our website, documenting the quiet wellspring of community support for our school and the families that have exercised their right to choose New Roots for their public high school education.

New Roots opponents have cited a comment made by the Board of Regents staff that we "lack evidence of adequate community support" to suggest that Ithaca does not support New Roots Charter School as an educational option. The statement was made because of a difference in documentation requirements between the two chartering entities, not because we failed to demonstrate that there was both parental demand and community support for New Roots. If we were applying to the Board of Regents, they would have only required that we provide 125 signatures of parents of students eligible to enroll in fall 2009. That would have been the extent of the "community support" necessary to obtain a charter through the Board of Regents pathway.

The evidence of community support that we submitted with our application was far more extensive. In May '08, we circulated a petition to collect documentation of parental support for the school. Many community members wanted to sign the petition as well! Over the course of several weeks, volunteers collected 576 signatures, about 400 of which were from parents. In addition, we provided data about LACS enrollment processes and their waiting list and 75 letters signed by parents of middle school-aged students, as well as letters from 45 local organizations and community leaders expressing their interest in supporting the development of the school.

Now that our charter has been approved and the serious business of starting a new school is underway, support for New Roots Charter School is growing in our community despite vocal opposition. We began documenting this quiet wellspring of support in March 2009, inviting people to sign a statement of endorsement or send us an email indicating that they would like to join our growing list of supporters. We now have over 1,000 names of supporters posted to our website, with more people writing every day asking to add their names to the list.

We wish to express our appreciation to the community for growing New Roots Charter School, and to the New Roots supporters that are stepping forward to make a public endorsement of the school on behalf of our families and students. We are truly a "grassroots" endeavor in service to our young people and our community in these challenging times, an investment in our collective future.



April 10, 2009

FROM THE DESK OF TINA NILSEN-HODGES
Principal, Superintendent of New Roots Charter School

Letter to the Community:

Dear Neighbors,

On April 8, 2009, I received a call from the Ithaca Journal asking me to comment on a letter to the Charter Schools Institute that had been unanimously approved by the Ithaca City School District Board of Education at their meeting on April 7. The letter requests that the Charter Schools Institute “revoke the NRCS charter for the 2009-2010 school year,” citing their inability to determine how to account for New Roots funding in the budget to be presented to taxpayers on April 22.

When we called our authorizer, the SUNY Charter Schools Institute, we learned that they had not yet received the letter. We were surprised that the media was the first to receive this letter, not the party to which it was addressed. This suggests to us that this letter is primarily for public display, a publicity stunt. We are concerned that it will further confuse and upset local families by implying that New Roots may not open in the fall. With nearly 90 students enrolled from 10 regional districts, New Roots enrollment is exceptionally strong for new charter schools at this point in the year, and we are firmly on track to open our doors in September.

For the Board of Education to say that if the Charter Schools Institute doesn't tell them what to do they simply will pretend New Roots doesn't exist is beyond comprehension. The people of Ithaca deserve better. After nearly a year's advance notice, it is irresponsible for the ICSD Board of Education to claim that they do not know how to budget for a charter school.

The Ithaca City School District Board of Education and Superintendent Pastel first learned about our application for a charter on May 14, 2008, when we sent an email detailing our assessment of the fiscal impact on the ICSD. They received a copy of the entire charter application in June, were informed that the application was approved by the SUNY Board of Trustees in September, and told that the process was finalized in January 2009.

Are we to believe that in the 11 months since first learning about the application for New Roots that the school board is only now thinking about how to budget for the school?

There are 115 charter schools currently operating in the State of New York; the first one opened ten years ago. There are plenty of districts that ICSD officials could have called for assistance in figuring out how to budget for a charter school. They could also have contacted the Charter Schools Institute or the Charter Schools Association for assistance.

In fact, after our approval this fall, I asked the Charter Schools Institute to provide contact information within the State Education Department for someone who could help the district with budgeting for a charter school. I conveyed this information to Superintendent Pastel both verbally and via email on Friday, December 12, 2008 at 5:34 P.M. There is no excuse for claiming ignorance now.

We want to be very clear about this now in order to avoid a situation like the one that developed in response to statements about my early outreach to the district about New Roots in fall 2007. Dr. Pastel has stated that she was not aware of our interest in developing the New Roots program within the ICSD despite verbal and email notification, as well as reference to an Ithaca Journal article that she acknowledged within my presence on the first day of school in September 2007.

My interest in engaging the ICSD in exploring sustainability education initiatives on the secondary level was also documented in my administrative internship proposal, which was approved by the ICSD Board of Education in spring 2007, and was discussed in my interviews for the administrative internship position with two assistant superintendents in spring 2007.

Not responding thoroughly and publicly to the notion that the New Roots founding team had simply sent "one email" to the ICSD on this matter has led to repeated public dissemination of misinformation. We are taking time from laying the groundwork for our fall opening today because the ICSD Board of Education's decision may undermine families and kids' ability to exercise their legal right to consider their public school choices, and the right of taxpayers within our district to access additional state aid for communities with new charter schools. As a result of the barrage of misinformation spread throughout the community in the past several months, I fear that some parents and students who were very excited about New Roots may have been discouraged from applying, negatively impacting both the benefits of greater school choice on our young people's success and the district's access to over \$1 million in transition aid in 2010.

New York State recognizes that it takes school districts time to adjust their programs and budgets when a charter school opens in their district for the first time, and provides financial support for this time period. Transition aid helps districts with 2% or more of their students in a charter school through the adjustment period. We have asked Dr. Pastel to give permission for ICSD employees to offer information so that district students know that New Roots is an option, thus increasing the likelihood that this level of 108 ICSD students at New Roots will be reached during our first year. So far she has not done so, and building-level PTA leadership has also declined to disseminate information about New Roots. How might kids in the ICSD benefit from having an additional \$1 million dollars in school funding next year? And how many young people who are not thriving in the large high school system will continue upon their present course because they do not know about their legal options?

Yes, these are challenging economic times for school districts, but the good news is that New Roots students are only entitled to about 70% of the dollars allocated for their education within the Ithaca City School District. We are charged with educating students for about \$12,000—the ICSD keeps the remaining \$6000 for each of our students, which will more than cover services that they are entitled to such as transportation on regularly-scheduled bus routes and special education services that they were already receiving from the district.

New Roots will be an excellent value for taxpayers' dollars; one we hope will inspire creative thinking about how to provide an excellent education for less among district schools in these challenging economic times.

Finally, I have to make a comment about the letter's reference to Ithaca being a district with no failing schools. The Ithaca City School District serves the needs of many students well. However, there are far too many students who are left behind. The district's passing rates on Regents exams and graduation rates for students of color and students who are economically disadvantaged are shockingly low.

New Roots is working with two national partners who have extensive research documenting their success in developing schools that support ALL students in achieving high levels of academic engagement and achievement, from those at risk in other school settings to those that are looking for greater challenges than those offered in traditional classrooms, igniting passion for learning in students who might otherwise simply go through the motions at school.

Families in our region have the right to know that this type of learning environment is an option for their child.

It is time for all those involved in education in the City of Ithaca put their differences aside and work together to ensure that the needs of every child are met.

I can assure you that the leadership of New Roots Charter School is ready to do just that.

Sincerely yours,

Tina Nilson-Hodges

Principal
New Roots Charter School