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## Our Turn: Sarah Friedman and Meg O’Leary:

### Time to support R.I. schools

By Sarah Friedman and Meg O’Leary

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Massachusetts is now recognizing that, while it has achieved remarkable results, it has left behind its lowest-income children of color.

The Learning Community is an independent public charter school in Central Falls committed to helping improve our public education system for all Rhode Island children. Fully 95 percent of our students are students of color, 98 percent urban. We have one of the highest English language learner rates in the state at 32 percent, and our poverty rate over 15 years has always been over 83 percent.

At the Learning Community, English language learners, black, Latino and low-income students all outperformed not only the Rhode Island state average, but also the Massachusetts state average for all of those subgroups on the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System tests. Our students overall in grades 3 through 8 outperformed the Rhode Island state average in both math and English language arts, and our elementary students were 49 percent proficient in literacy, nearly matching the Massachusetts state average. We have one of the highest rates of family engagement in the state and region.

We believe that the work ahead for Rhode Island is to build from our strengths, learn from what Massachusetts has already done (and other successful states and districts), and also learn from our own and its mistakes, so that from the very beginning we work intentionally to end these achievement gaps and give our low income, students of color the education they have always deserved.

We have great strengths to grow from here in Rhode Island — most of all the students, families and educators in our schools. We need a collective commitment to give the people in our schools sustained, consistent and strategic support.

Specifically, we should make sure we thoughtfully and honestly look at data, avoiding any oversimplifying of results. We should empower our teachers and school leaders with the professional development, facilities, infrastructure and money they need to do their very best work. We should stop switching tests. We should be systematic in our approach to English language development work. We should talk, as schools, districts, children and families, about racism. And we need collective understanding and commitment to a long-term plan that reflects the very highest standards for all of our children in public schools. We should hold the same standards for all children as we hold for our own children.

As members of a community, we should work together with urgency to pull in the same direction or we will not be able to extend the true meaning of community to our children and families.

To us, community means something we have learned from our kids and families— if you are OK, I’m OK. Right now, Rhode Island, our children are not OK.

*Sarah Friedman and Meg O’Leary are the co-founders and co-directors of the Learning Community, a K-8 independent public charter school serving 574 children and their families from Central Falls, Providence and Pawtucket.*