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OPEN LETTER TO THE COMMUNITY COLLABORATE AND ELEVATE

For far too long the Hempstead School District has been in the Long Island press for poor student academic performance, lack of leadership, violence and corruption. The need for major change is obvious. Based on my success turning around failing areas like the South Bronx and Brownsville, Brooklyn, the Board hired me as Superintendent and charged me with transforming a failing district. I accepted this charge to save the lives of thousands of students.

My success in Brooklyn and the Bronx was based on a model of education where children and parents build deep relationships with their teachers, and teachers work in teams and have a career ladder with opportunity for significant promotion. As New York Times columnist David Brooks described the model – the Relationship School. The Board accepted my vision and integral to this vision is a partnership with organizations with whom I've been involved in the past: Harvard University, the New York City Leadership Academy and the New American Initiative (NAI) (of which I was founder and CEO, and resigned therefrom prior to becoming Superintendent).

In order to raise student performance, reduce the violence and expose the corruption, I have done the following:

- Hired teachers who had expertise in creating teams of teachers and who were charged with promoting a culture of learning in Hempstead.
- Partnered with the NAI to begin whole district transformation through listening and communicating skills, conflict mediation, reflective and collaborative hiring practices, helping develop the District's strategic plan, enhancing teaching effectiveness, and many other necessary programs and improvements.
- Hired Dr. Varleton McDonald, as my Deputy, a 30-year veteran educator and administrator who transformed one of the 12 most violent schools in NYC like I did.
- Hired special investigators and a forensic auditing firm to begin to root out the corruption and mismanagement. Deeply troubling, many financial records were burned prior to when the RFPs for the forensic auditors were due.
- Performed a facilities review that found 1,600 students in crumbling and moldy trailers, some of which are 34 years old, unmaintained and decaying boilers, flooding, and graffiti that was more than 13-years old.
- Reviewed over 1,500 high school students' transcripts with the guidance counselors and found that most of our seniors will not graduate and will not earn a high school diploma. The teachers shared that students who took Algebra and failed were placed in Geometry and if they failed Geometry they were placed in Trigonometry. How demoralizing and humiliating for our students!
- Ran a series of parenting workshops for the community to help parents foster confidence in their children.

In late November the voting majority of the Board shifted. At that point, my ability to continue to improve academic outcomes and root out the corruption also changed. Since then, the following has transpired:

- The Board fired the Special Investigators who were looking at abuse, mismanagement and possible corruption.

- As I turned my car into the High School for a Board meeting on December 7, people opened gunfire and riddled the corner house at that precise moment. We proceeded to have the Board meeting after the police secured the area.
- I recommended to the Board we tear down the Rhodes building and propose a Bond issue to rebuild a school on the site. The Board voted down the resolution 3 to 2.
- The Board, without any notice, suspended my authority and proceeded to fire the expert teachers I had hired. This was a 3 to 2 vote as well. Even though, these teachers were working 12-14 hours a day and had almost completed an application for a \$5.4 million dollar grant for the district in addition to all their other responsibilities. These hard-working teachers were let go right before the holidays!
- The Board terminated its contract with the New American Initiative, which was leading the transformative work. The Board effectively pulled the rug from under me, and derailed the plan set in place to reverse the downward spiral.

I have reflected hard and long on what is being done and I cannot allow myself and our District to be either intimidated or to fall, because the 8,000 students of Hempstead need continuity and leadership. I remain firm in the belief that all good people of conscience will look upon Hempstead and see that the way forward is a simple one.

We need collaboration and honesty. Collaborate with me to rebuild Rhodes School so we can get rid of the trailers and place our students in real buildings. Collaborate with me to stop the violence and not place impediments on a grant that could do much to curb it. Collaborate with me to root out corruption and mismanagement. Collaborate with me to increase student performance. Collaborate with me to make Hempstead Schools thrive again. If we are honest, the need of working together on all these levels must be admitted as something that is obvious.

Politics, self-interests, patronage, vendettas, threats, and cover-ups cannot rule the day.

Our collective goal must be to elevate the standards for all involved in and attached to the Hempstead School District. The transformation which is necessary in Hempstead will not happen without hard work, transparency, honesty and commitment to meaningful change.

I am asking everyone from the students of Hempstead to the staff to the Board Members to the Commissioner of Education to the citizenry at large to work together to help those who are most vulnerable – our children. While some may see this as a noble cause, it is more than that. **It is imperative!** The future success of the community is tied to the value we place on the success of each of our children.

Educationally yours,

Shimon Waronker, Ed.D.
Superintendent of the Hempstead Schools