

PRYOR COMES HOME, PROMISES CHARTER BOOST

Published: New Haven Independent, November 16, 2011

By Melissa Bailey

In a visit to the hometown charter school he founded 13 years ago, Stefan Pryor applauded the school's expansion—and vowed to support more Amistad Academies in his new post as the state's education chief.

Pryor, who joined Gov. Dannel Malloy's administration as education commissioner last month, made the remarks in a dedication ceremony Wednesday morning at the newly combined Amistad Academy K-8 school, now housed in the former Dwight School at 130 Edgewood Ave.

"Who are we proud to be?" Pryor asked a gymnasium full of students, private donors and politicians.

"Amistad Academy!" the crowd roared in response.

It was a familiar chant for the students and for Pryor, one of the founders of the school, which first opened in 1999 on James Street. The public school, which began with 84 students in 5th and 6th grade, has grown to serve 734 kids in grades K to 8.

Pryor was part of a planning group that lobbied the state for more charter school seats, then created what is now one of the oldest and most well-established charter schools in the state. He started the planning process while working as an aide to Mayor John DeStefano then left to finish Yale Law School and launch the school. Pryor said he traveled North America with Achievement First CEO Dacia Toll to look at effective urban schools before the founding group decided on the charter model.

Achievement First, Amistad's parent company, now runs a network of 20 schools in New Haven, Hartford, Bridgeport and Brooklyn, NY.

"None of us could have possibly dreamed" that the experiment would take off as it did, Pryor said. The most surprising development, he said, is that he's now found himself in charge of the state's education system.

He credited Amistad with "the attainment of the allegedly and apparently impossible"—teaching low-income kids to excel and defy the achievement gap. Connecticut still has the worst achievement gap in the country, Pryor noted.

He called for Amistad's model to be replicated to further close that gap.

Amistad's \$34 million rehab project was paid for by 80 percent state funds. It was the first charter school in Connecticut to be rehabbed as part of the state school construction program, which previously was reserved for non-charter public schools.

Pryor called the new Amistad "91,000 square feet of hope and achievement"—and "91,000 square feet of what is possible for the rest of the state."

After he stepped off the stage, Pryor was asked about his call to create more Amistads.

"Yes—we will promote their expansion," as well as the expansion of other best practices around the state, Pryor said.

"There are a number of schools that are exemplary" across the state, that are "achieving at a level that would not be expected," he said. That includes not just charters, but other successful public schools as well.

"Those exemplary schools ought to be replicated" and "emulated," he said.

Advocates have long lobbied the state to lift barriers to adding more charter schools, and seats in those schools. Right now, every charter school seat is approved by the legislature every year. Charters are funded on a per-pupil basis.

Achievement First CEO Toll, whose allies effectively lobbied for an increase in the per-pupil fee last year, said she'd again be asking the state to lift barriers to charters' growth.

Pryor agreed the state is too restrictive when it comes to fostering the growth of charters.

"Our state needs to be more welcoming to effective school models," he said.

"The funding formula is broken"—both for charter schools and for regular public school districts, which are funded through the Education Cost Sharing program. Pryor said he's committed to revamping ECS, and he's working on a legislative package that would do so.

Charter school proponents have argued for "money follows the child" system, where when a child leaves a public school district to attend a charter school, the district would pay the charter school to educate the child.

How will Pryor change school funding? It's too early to name solutions, he said.

Any solutions will "follow my listening tour," he said.

Pryor continued that listening tour Wednesday in New Haven. He toured the gym floor, where he ran into Dwight activist Curlena MacDonald, and handed a business card to state Rep. Roland Lemar.

He caught up with New Haven state Sen. Martin Looney, the state Senate majority leader. He hugged New Haven banker and charter proponent Jeff Klaus, a co-founder of Amistad, and suggested they grab dinner.

Within half an hour, Pryor had made several promises to have meals with New Haveners now that he's back in town.

The education commissioner has been a presence in town in the past month. He shook hands at the New Haven school board and congratulated Mayor John DeStefano at his reelection victory party at the Wicked Wolf bar. He's currently living in New Haven's Ninth Square.

Wednesday's conversation with New Haveners began in the morning, when Pryor met with New Haven teachers union leadership at the Omni Hotel.

Pryor suggested New Haven Public Schools' model should be spread wide as well.

"New Haven made a decision to create a process through with a relationship" would be established between labor and management, while bringing in reforms such as new teacher evaluations based on student performance and new work rules at turnaround schools.

"That alone is a lesson in itself," Pryor said.