

To: Council President Ernest “Trippi” Congo, II, Council Member Coby J. Owens, Shané N. Darby, Zanthia Oliver, Michelle Harlee, Christian Willauer, Yolanda M. McCoy, Christofer C. Johnson, Nathan Field, Maria D. Cabrera, Alexander D. Hackett, James Spadola, or Latisha Bracy

From: Kendra Brumfield-NaWangna, Legislative Research and Policy Director

CC: Honorable Governor Bethany Hall-Long
Honorable Governor-Elect Matt Meyer
Honorable Mayor John C. Carney Jr.
Redding Consortium for Educational Equity
Wilmington Learning Collaborative
Parent Information Center
Elijah Simmons, Chief of Staff
Marchelle Basnight, Senior Legislative Analyst and Chief Financial Officer

Date: January 10, 2025

Re: Proposed Office of Educational Advocacy

Executive Summary

Education is an ongoing issue in the City for youth, and so many times Council has been told there is nothing that can be done about education, because it is the responsibility of the State. In the meantime Wilmington’s children are continuously suffering, and existing initiatives focused on City students are in need of local engagement to bolster their efforts. Children and families need a voice and an advocate on their behalf.

This Office **would signal Council’s long-term commitment to ensuring that Wilmingtonians’ interests are represented in the conversation on what education can and should look like for City residents.** It would also **position Council to lead a shift towards a whole-child approach for all Wilmington youth** that recognizes that community and environment are also essential elements of healthy child development.¹

Why should Council be involved in education?

On October 30, 2024, at the request of Representative Nnamdi O. Chukwuocha, a Committee of the Whole meeting was held to discuss the state of education for Wilmington’s students.² This meeting and the November 6 Education, Youth, and Family Services Committee meeting that followed **revealed numerous concerns about the education available to residents** and highlighted **a strong desire for Council support and increased engagement in the educational landscape.**³

¹ “Whole Child Education,” <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/topic/whole-child-education>

² Committee of the Whole Meeting, <https://wilmingtonde.new.swagit.com/videos/319998>, (October 30, 2024)

³ Education, Youth & Family Services Committee Meeting, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vud6_qdhc8U, (November 6, 2024)

While organizations like the Wilmington Learning Collaborative (WLC) and Redding Consortium for Educational Equity (Redding Consortium) are taking meaningful steps toward narrowing the achievement gap, it is the mandate of the Wilmington City Council to actively pursue policy, legislative action, and intergovernmental partnerships that contribute to the well-being of constituents. There are **numerous aspects of education that go beyond the academic curriculum**.⁴ Ensuring that housing is affordable so Wilmington educators can live in the city where they work, empowering parents and guardians to be more engaged in their children's academic journey, improving access to economic opportunity, fostering safe and secure communities where children experience fewer adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and, most importantly, maintaining thriving lines of communication and engagement between students, families, schools, educational stakeholders, and Council's legislative counterparts in Dover are all within Council's purview.

While educational initiatives can be costly, the National Center of Education Studies estimates that, on average, **a person who does not complete high school can cost the economy \$270,000 over their lifetime** in the form of lower tax contributions, reliance on public assistance programs, and increased involvement with the criminal justice system.⁵

Why is an Office of Educational Advocacy needed?

Wilmington has a uniquely challenging educational landscape. While the Redding Consortium and WLC work diligently to address **underperforming public schools locally**, other students who reside in Wilmington are **contending with the challenges of having to travel outside of the City** they know to access learning opportunities, still **other students and their families must navigate private and charter school systems. are all constituents who need and deserve support.**

Within the City, the Redding Consortium is developing its plans to withdraw Christina School District from the City's educational landscape.⁶ The WLC is compiling data and recommendations to improve academic standards and practices within schools, but doing so under the authority of MOUs (memoranda of understanding) that terminate at the conclusion of the academic year if school districts and/or boards elect not to renew them.⁷ It is **important that this Council has a consistent, entrenched mechanism to stay abreast of these processes, to amplify the voices of constituents, and to offer guidance in ensuring that Council's engagement efforts are appropriate, impactful, and sustainable.**

While Delaware's School Choice system gives families the option to attend school outside of the City's boundaries, it is not without sacrifice and hardship for many. These young people and their families do not fall under the purview of existing organizations aimed at Wilmington student success.

⁴ "Whole Child Education," <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/topic/whole-child-education>

⁵ "Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States," [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/dropout/intro.asp#:~:text=Relative%20to%20individuals%20who%20complete,\(Levin%20and%20Belfield%202007\)](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/dropout/intro.asp#:~:text=Relative%20to%20individuals%20who%20complete,(Levin%20and%20Belfield%202007))

⁶ "Facts on Redistricting," <https://www.solutionsfordelawareschools.com/redistricting/>

⁷ Memorandum of Understanding Among the Christina School Board, the Superintendent of Schools for the Christina School District, and Christina Education Association, <https://www.christinak12.org/cms/lib/DE50000539/Centricity/Domain/3391/CEA-Wilmington-MOU-final-signed-071023.pdf>

Wilmington's junior high students, high school students, and their families are especially hard-hit by their impaired ability to participate in school activities, their lack of access to culturally-competent assistance with navigating school-related processes, and relatively little public attention on their educational needs.

Private and charter schools are also rarely included in the dialogue on how to serve the needs of Wilmington's students. Because they have greater discretion regarding their policies, academic outcomes for City students in these schools are less visible. Creating space for these educational stakeholders, as well as the local students and parents they serve, to express their concerns and contribute to a new path for educational advocacy and equity in the City of Wilmington is paramount.

The resounding message from educational stakeholders is that bridging the achievement gap requires an array of resources and collaboration. ***The Office of Educational Advocacy would help Council leverage its role as a connector to fill some of the persisting gaps in the City's educational landscape and to facilitate sustained advocacy for youth.***

What will the Office of Educational Advocacy do?

The proposed funding ***would facilitate the initial phase of establishing an Office of Educational Advocacy.*** Given the complexity of Wilmington's opportunity and achievement gaps, this phase would be dedicated to ***fact-finding, identifying and building relationships with key stakeholders, evaluating the range of concerns in and related to the academic environment, setting priorities, and developing an actionable plan for consistent engagement*** in Wilmington students' educational journeys.

Phase one includes three key staff roles:

- A ***Director*** tasked with establishing policies and operational procedures, as well as ***making determinations of where Council's influence can be most impactful***
- A ***Consultant*** with the responsibility to render ***technical assistance***, including, but not limited to, analyzing existing research and reports on the state of education for Wilmington's students to bolster public engagement and ***initiate the process of translating practice-oriented findings into legislative action***
- An ***Administrative Assistant*** to ***manage the ongoing scheduling, communication, and reporting duties*** associated with the Office's operations

These three individuals would work in concert to develop the Office into a mechanism for ***sustained, informed advocacy*** for Wilmingtonians' educational concerns. Collectively, they would be responsible for synthesizing the many perspectives on Wilmington students' needs and advising Council on the development of targeted priorities that are suitable to their capacity and legislative authority.

How would this Office be distinct from existing educational entities?

The Redding Consortium and WLC are institutions with an explicit focus on students attending school within the City limits, however, ***neither of these organizations was designed to offer a permanent solution to educational concerns*** (See Table 1). Furthermore, both of these entities

have openly expressed frustration regarding their lack of support and limitations to their capacity to fully advocate for Wilmington youth.

Redding Consortium

In 2019, Senate Bill 148 authorized the Redding Consortium to: “Recommend policies and practices to the Governor and General Assembly and to the Secretary of Education to achieve educational equity and to improve educational outcomes of all Pre-K to grade 12 students in the City of Wilmington and northern New Castle County....monitor the educational progress and outcomes of students in the City of Wilmington as well as all low-income, English learners and other students at risk across northern New Castle County....recommend policies and actions to the Governor and General Assembly that support the continuous improvement of public education in the City of Wilmington and northern New Castle County.”⁸

The ***Consortium’s main objective is reconfiguring Wilmington’s three-school district system into a two-district system.*** According to its enabling legislation, “The ***Consortium shall remain in operation until the Governor and General Assembly conclude that its mission has been fulfilled.***”⁹

It should be noted that Senator Lockman and Representative Chukwuocha have introduced some innovative dynamics to the Consortium’s work, including placing greater emphasis on the social drivers of health and education, as well as Boost, which aims to improve high school graduation rates.¹⁰ The Office would give Council a mechanism ***to amplify their progress and to take legislative action to ensure that the City’s infrastructure is conducive to the long-term sustainability of these and similar efforts.***

Wilmington Learning Collaborative

Mission: “Our primary objective is to establish a consistent learning experience for students, while simultaneously fostering the empowerment of educators, school leaders, and communities. Through these efforts, we aim to ***enhance overall student outcomes within the city of Wilmington schools.***”¹¹

Schools served:

- Maurice Pritchett Sr. Academy
- The Bayard School
- Harlan Elementary School
- Joseph E. Johnson Elementary School

⁸ Senate Bill 148, <https://legis.delaware.gov/json/BillDetail/GeneratePdfEngrossment?engrossmentId=23780&docTypeId=6>

⁹ Senate Bill 148, <https://legis.delaware.gov/json/BillDetail/GeneratePdfEngrossment?engrossmentId=23780&docTypeId=6>

¹⁰ Redding Consortium for Educational Equity Full Body Meeting, <https://bpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/sites.udel.edu/dist/7/3504/files/2024/12/Redding-Consortium-Full-Body-Meeting-Minutes-09-09-2024.pdf>, September 9, 2024.

¹¹ About the WLC, <https://wlc-de.org/about/>

- Pulaski Early Education Center
- Stubbs Early Education Center
- Warner Elementary School
- Shortlidge Academy
- William C. Lewis Dual Language Elementary School¹²

After junior high, Wilmington students transition out of WLC. Furthermore, the agreement establishing the WLC stipulates that: “This **agreement will renew annually** on July 1 of each year. Should a district indicate that the district desires to opt out of the agreement, the WLC Council must be made aware of any such intent by December 31 of the prior year....Additionally, **a district may terminate its involvement in the WLC at any time if the state fails to provide the financial support** for WLC schools on an ongoing basis...”¹³

Parent Information Center of Delaware, Inc. (PIC)

Parent Information Center of Delaware, Inc. (PIC) has a mission to “improve health and educational outcomes for children and youth by empowering them, their families, and the professionals who serve them.”¹⁴ PIC provides an array of services, including a Public Education Ombudsperson Program that assists in resolving academic and disciplinary disputes.

While the PIC organizational structure includes many meaningful student services, it **has a broad mission of serving all of Delaware’s public and charter school youth**. Not only does the scope of the demand on this institution limit its effectiveness, but the **staff are not necessarily familiar with the pervasive challenges that impact Wilmington families**.

Unlike the proposed Office of Educational Advocacy, PIC’s operational model also constrains this institution to addressing individual cases that parents take the initiative to present them with. This **case-by-case approach implies that PIC does not furnish public data on how the scope and scale of educational concerns are evolving over time**.

Table 1: Overview of the Proposed Office of Educational Advocacy and Existing Educational Stakeholders

	Office of Educational Advocacy	Wilmington Learning Collaborative	Redding Consortium	Parent Information Center of Delaware, Inc.
Serving population	All students residing in Wilmington	Presently 9 participating schools, at the discretion of school boards and districts	City of Wilmington and North New Castle public school students	All Delaware public and charter school students

¹² About the WLC, <https://wlc-de.org/about/>

¹³ Agreement to Establish the Wilmington Learning Collaborative, https://wlc-de.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/WLCagreement_nosigns.pdf

¹⁴ Parent Information Center of Delaware, Inc., <https://picofdel.org/>

Life Span	Ongoing	Contingent on annual extensions	Until the Governor and Assembly deem its mission is fulfilled	Ongoing
Mission	Supporting Progress and Advocacy for Remarkable Kids through Learning and Empowerment (SPARKLE)	Enhance student outcomes within City of Wilmington schools	Oversee the reconfiguration of Wilmington's school district infrastructure	Improving health and educational outcomes through case-by-case engagement

Both Governor Meyer and Mayor Carney have expressed a commitment to make education a top priority.¹⁵ Collaboration and resources from the State are essential to creating a system of education that serves Wilmington youth, however, ***Council's proximity to the constituency they serve is equally important to ensuring that the educational agenda is able to continually evolve according to the changing needs of local residents.*** At the City-level, Mayor Carney's experience and knowledge are fundamental for positioning City departments to better serve local youth. His stated goals include "expanding aftercare and out-of-school time programs" and investing in "early childhood care and K-12 education and collaborating with community-based partners to support families." Without a department of education or other entity in the Administration's organizational structure that is specifically devoted to youth, and mandated by law, these initiatives run the risk of being fragmented and transient. ***The Office would represent Council's commitment to join both Governor Meyer and Mayor Carney in creating permanency for the academic solutions that they bring to the Wilmington educational landscape.***

Why now?

Ultimately, the quality of today's education environment is reflective of the City's collective future. ***The workforce, economy, public safety, and civic participation all depend on residents' access to a quality education.***

After more than four decades of a fragmented educational system, ***the reconfiguration of Wilmington's school districts, led by the Redding Consortium, presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create lasting change for local youth.*** This monumental task requires a range of supportive efforts to ensure that it positively impacts the academic character of City schools.

For students attending school outside of Wilmington, especially junior high and high school-aged youth, this critical stage of adolescence when children require more social connections and community engagement rather than less. Without an entity to send a resounding message that these youth are valued and that their City is willing and able to meet the challenge of overseeing their

¹⁵ The Education System Delaware Deserves," <https://spotlightdelaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Matt-Meyer-for-Delaware-Education-Plan-.pdf>; "Action Plan for Wilmington," <https://johncarney.org/transition-report/>

well-being, Council will be confronting the challenges of poverty, criminality, and brain drain far into the future.