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A questioning voice is silenced

By Nilda Ruiz

Just when we needed her most, Philadelphia's School Reform Commission has lost Heidi Ramirez. And what a loss it is.

Ramirez is a woman of extraordinary accomplishments and integrity. Her qualifications and credentials are impeccable. From Harvard to Stanford, her resume is a map of educational excellence. She knows how to connect the dots from the classrooms to the boardrooms and all points between.

But Ramirez, the first Latina to serve on the SRC, resigned last week after spending much of her short tenure at odds with school district CEO Arlene Ackerman. While Latinos are a minority in the city, we have the highest dropout rates and the greatest needs. That's one of many reasons the Latino community was happy and relieved that Ramirez was there to advocate for our children.

Ramirez personally visited classrooms and raised questions about what our children were actually learning. She visited the back rooms and raised questions about no-bid contracts. Put simply, she raised questions; she is not a "yes woman."

Anyone who is truly a leader would welcome those questions, because they make people think. They make them reconsider their positions to make sure they're right. It's good to think about such things.

It's also good to be accountable. The SRC and the school district's CEO must be held accountable to Philadelphia and to educational ideals. They must be accountable for the struggles of the children and the teachers and administrators trying to make quality education an everyday reality in Philadelphia. And they must be accountable for the system's flaws. That's the only way to fix them.

The SRC's members should feel responsible for each child and every dollar in their care. They must advocate and ask questions on behalf of the kids. They must set performance goals and see to it that the system, the students, and the CEO perform better. Those who can't handle that should get some ceremonial position to satisfy their need to be in the paper.

It is no shame to discover a problem and not be able to fix it overnight. But it is a tragic shame when grown men and women who already have their educations fail to find the courage to tell the truth about why our children are not getting theirs.

Ramirez was trying to gather the truth by asking good questions. Ackerman had said answering her questions took too much time and effort. Why wouldn't a responsible CEO want to answer questions from a highly qualified board member? What lesson is Ramirez's ouster teaching our students? Speak truth to power, or might makes right?

H.G. Wells wrote, "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." Heidi Ramirez knew this and showed as much with her diligence and sense of urgency. In her absence, the rest of the commission should adopt her top priority: the students.



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