

keep enrollment within the limits set by its charter. The decision stemmed from the court-ordered repayment, Palmer stated.

In a two-page letter addressing school staff, parents, guardians and community partners and vendors, Palmersaid, "Please know that closing the Walter D. Palmer Leadership Learning Partners Charter School is one of the saddest moments of my life. It is important that you know how much I have valued your dedication and commitment in joining me with the fight for education reform and school choice."

School administrators testified at a revocation hearing in October but both campuses were closed before an administrative officer issued a decision on the matter. Administrators last month invoked their Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination 77 times at hearings on its charter.

During the hearing, Palmer testified that the discrepancy was not deliberate but occurred while the school transitioned to a new record-keeping system under a state mandate.

"The board of trustees spent countless hours trying to review options; however, in the best interest of the students and families that we serve; and the dedicated staff, the only option available is to close our school," according the letter send to Palmer school parents.

Sidebar

Walter Palmer, founder of Walter D. Palmer Learning Partners Charter School, holds his chin during revocation hearing In the fall. The school district was seeking to revoke the school's charter for issues relating to student performance and school finances, PHOTO BY TRIBUNE CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER ABDUL R. SULAYMAN

After more than a year of scrutiny over academic performance and financial soundness, the Waiter D. PalmerLeadership Learning Partners Charter School announced this week it will not reopen after the Christmas break.

Abraham Talks Pot, Race Relations, Schools and More”
by PATRICK KERKSTRA

Former District Attorney Lynne Abraham is the early leader in the narrowing mayoral field, with a huge head start over her opponents in name recognition and a dawning realization in the political class that her campaign is very much for real. As 2014 closed out, Abraham sat down for an hour-long interview—interrupted once or twice by fundraising calls—to talk about her agenda, racial foment over big city policing, the decriminalization of marijuana, Philadelphia schools, Obama’s youth and inexperience and much more.

Later this week, we’ll wrestle with the question of how much Abraham’s age will be (or should be) a factor in the campaign.

Citifed: Why did you choose to run for mayor now, and not seven years ago?

Abraham: I’ll tell you why. My husband was alive but ill. He had a stroke in 2005, and he exacted from me a promise that I wouldn’t run because he knew that his time was short. And I owed him, I really mean I owed him everything. He never complained about the fact that I was out every night of the week. He never complained that we ate dinner at 10 o’clock at night. He never complained about anything.

The one thing he didn’t want for me was running for mayor. It wasn’t because he thought I wasn’t competent or wouldn’t be good. He knows that I don’t suffer fools gladly, and I’m totally honest. He said, “This is not a business where honest people can succeed.” He said, “Look, this is not for you. Don’t do it because I’m old and I’m sick.”

I said, “Hey, I’m with you.” That’s the one personal story I tell about him. People say, “Why didn’t you run before?” My husband just didn’t want that for me, but I always wanted it.

Then the ship came sailing past me once again, and I said, “Holy smokes. How many times in life does a ship come sailing past you?”

Citifed: In what way did the ship come sailing past?

Abraham: I think there was an absence of leadership, and people are looking for a strong, different kind of leader. By that, I take it to mean that they don’t object that I’m a woman, that we’re mature enough to say, “OK, she’s not a kid.” We can say all we want about youth, and youth must be served, but youth doesn’t have experience.

We see that in our President, who had youth and handsomeness and brightness. Hasn’t served him well, because he didn’t know the nuances of governing, and he’s gotten his head handed to him 12 different ways. Even though he’s a consummately decent human being and wants to do the right thing.

Citifed: So what is Philadelphia’s trajectory right now? Is it on the upswing? Is it on the downswing? Is it treading water?

Abraham: I think generally it's on an upswing, but there are drags on that upswing. It's not climbing like a rocket. It's not going straight up. There are drags on this vessel. The biggest drag is poverty.

One huge section of our population, almost 30 percent of our population, is at or below the poverty line, over 400,000 people. And about 188,000 of those are living in abject poverty, less than \$11,000 a year. Just think about that for a minute: 180,000 people right in this city, elderly population, hungry, destitute, impoverished. We have all kinds of issues. Poverty is the biggest drag.

Part of the poverty is education. If you have a highly educated population, you don't, generally speaking, have poverty. That's the one two punch for Philadelphia, poverty and education. You wouldn't have poverty if you had a first class education system.

I don't believe as one candidate has said, "Get rid of the SRC." That's ridiculous. It's absurd. That person really doesn't know what he's talking about.

Citifed: Governor Wolf has said that as well.

Abraham: ... I believe he will think better of that... I think that was a ploy. I don't really love it, but I think it was a ploy to make sure he was going to get as many votes as he could out of Philadelphia to insure a bigger win...

I went to public schools in Philadelphia. At that time there were very good parochial schools. The parochial schools are just disappearing into the ether, much to my regret. The public schools were great. I don't know how many people of my generation went to public schools, but I think it was almost everybody. I got a first class education. My teachers were fully invested in me. Teachers today are still fully invested in their kids, but they're frustrated and angry.

So what's the disconnect? It's all of this. It's some union, some teachers. I believe that part of the problem with teachers is that they don't have the wherewithal to get supplies. They have to bring it in themselves. They don't have the kind of support systems in the school for kids who come from backgrounds which are not as privileged.

I was poor. I had nothing, but the problems kids face today are entirely different than the problems I faced. First of all, we didn't have television. We didn't have all these electronic devices. We weren't communicating with the world. Everybody wasn't into our deepest thoughts every minute of the day, 24-hour news cycle, all this intrusion into one's life. If you had a problem there was a counselor. Now there's one counselor for 2,000 kids. Kids need counselors. They need support..

So where is the disconnect? Is it the physical plant? Yeah. Is it partly the union? Absolutely.

Citifed: The union in what way?

Abraham: There are several things. I think the fact that there very well may be—and I'm not against teachers, I give all credit to teachers—two or three kinds of unions in the schools. There's the principal's union and the administrator's union and the teacher's union. Come on, can we simplify this a little bit? Can we make this a little more about the kids than union stuff?

Tenure for life when you don't deserve it? Not good. Performance, I think performance standards for both kids and teachers are important. If you don't make the standard, I don't care who you are, you shouldn't be there. I think that's going to be an issue.

The physical plant, I don't think we ought to be keeping open all these old schools. I use my school as an example, the Bryant Elementary School at 60th and Cedar. It was a dungeon when I went there. It's even a worse dungeon now.

Citifed: The district did close 24 schools in 2013. Do you think more need to be closed?

Abraham: Yes, and I'm hoping the Bryant School is one of them. They closed my school, Germantown High School, this past year. When I went to Germantown a few years ago I felt like I was walking through an armed camp. Probation officers and hall monitors, doors were locked. What? Metal detectors? Come on, probation officers? Not good. People with walkie-talkies.

Citifed: Is funding is part of the problem?

Abraham: I think there's no question about it. Essentially we're depriving our children in Philadelphia of a first class education because our rate of spending is around \$12,500 a kid. The suburbs are doing 18, 20, 22, 24 thousand a year. You can't expect the same product.

Especially given the disruptions in a lot of families, if there is a family structure at all in some of these homes in Philadelphia, which I totally understand...that's where I got a lot of my customers from in the DA's office. These were kids who came from tumultuous, violent, unstructured backgrounds where school wasn't even important in their lives and everybody though they were going to die by 21, so they didn't care. "I'm going to be dead in a few years so let me do whatever I want..."

Citifed: What can a mayor do to help Governor Wolf to bring more dollars to Philadelphia? And what's the local responsibility for funding the schools?

Abraham: You have to change the tone of governing... You have to sit around the circle and start talking, finding out what the legislature can and cannot do, what they will and will not do.

I understand there's a \$2 billion budget hole in the commonwealth. As for the city, I know what our pension deficit is, but I want to see how badly off we really are in all of our finances. I certainly cannot promise anything unless I see what's our income? What's our outgo? Are we spending money in the best way we can? Are we bringing in the most money we can? What can change without involving constitutional changes, which are extraordinarily difficult?

Citifed: There are a few criminal justice issues I wanted to touch on with you. Let's start with marijuana decriminalization. What are your thoughts on that?

Abraham: I'm already on record about the decriminalization of marijuana. I'm against it, especially for kids.

I'm going to tell you something. If you look at what alcohol has done for our society, with the disruption of families, alcohol addiction, drunken driving, homicide by vehicle... I can tell you that we are going to pay a heavy cost for all this fun and games that we think is so great.

...Just so you know I'm being really clear. When I was DA we had many, many, many young kids arrested for possession of an ounce of marijuana. They all went into a program. They participated in a six-month program. They walked off their time. They went to a class on drug abuse and at the end of the six months, they had no criminal record.

Citifed: So you see the problems with criminal records for minor drug possessions when it comes to future prospects?

Abraham: I absolutely, totally disagree that our jails are filled with people who are low-level marijuana possessors. That's an absolute lie. Now if you say to me, "Most of our crime is fueled by drug addiction," I would say that's likely correct. You're talking about oxycontin. You're talking about heroin, cocaine, synthetic drugs, all the other drugs. Our jails are not filled with kids who are smoking a joint. That's a total lie.

Listen, let's just cut through all the baloney. Let's just get to what's real and what's fake. It's a fake program. The kids who are stupid enough to give their real name and address will come in for a program. They'll pay \$25, or not. Maybe the parent will but there are plenty of parents who don't have 25, so they're not going to pay it.

What are you going to do, incarcerate somebody for \$25? It's a fake. Why don't just say what it is? It's a fake. There will be only a few people who will pay 25 bucks, and that will be the end of it. Am I against that? No. I'm not. What I am against is kids smoking dope, which will affect their cognition.

... A lot of kids do stupid things. A lot of kids overdose. A lot of kids die. A lot of kids get into accidents. Do you see what I'm trying to say? Drugs don't come for free. There isn't any free lunch with drugs. I'm against any kind of drug use, period, because it destroys lives. It kills people.

I recognize that people like to do stupid, reckless things. People like to climb the sides of buildings. They like to jump out of airplanes. They like to bungee jump and get killed. They like to take dope of any kind. They like to inject. They like to smoke.

Citifed: So what should the city policy be?

Abraham: First of all, let me just say that Jim Kenney's bills are illegal. They're not worth the paper they're written on. You cannot preempt state law with any city council ordinance. It's just a feel good ordinance which means nothing... As a matter of fact, the police commissioner can say, "Councilman, these laws don't even mean anything. They're worthless."

He hasn't done that. Why? Because he won't bother with it. He'll let whatever happens happen. Whatever is going to happen with these kids is going to happen with these kids.

Citifed: Let's talk about what Commissioner Ramsey for a second. How do you think he's done?

Abraham: I think he's done a good job. I like Commissioner Ramsey. I've worked with him. He's bright. He's effective...

Citifed: Would you seek to retain him?

Abraham: I have no job to offer him. I'm a lawyer right now.

Citifed: It's a hypothetical.

Abraham: Who am I to say? No, I can't even answer that. First of all, he's on a presidential commission. Who knows where he's going to be. But if you're asking me, "Would I be willing to sit down and discuss it with him?" I certainly would, but I'm not in a position to offer him anything. I don't have a job. I don't have a job myself here. How am I going to offer him a job?

Citifed: How about your successor? District Attorney Williams?

Abraham: I haven't been paying attention, frankly. When I left that office, trust me, I left it. You'll have to tell me how he's doing. I can only tell you about what I read in the newspaper.

Citifed: Let's talk a little more broadly here. I'm sure you've been aware of the racial tension between police forces and black communities and citizens around the country. I'm thinking of Ferguson and the incident in New York. I'm wondering what your thoughts are about those tensions, and what you've observed in Philadelphia and the state of relations here.

Abraham: I'm not going to compare Ferguson and other places to Philadelphia because I don't know that that's a good thing. I can tell you overall I think ... we have come an extraordinarily long way.

But, and this is a big but, I don't believe in post racial America, that we've gotten there yet. We still have a tremendous way to go...

If you want to make one comparison... we have a black mayor, a black city council president, many black elected representatives including majority leader of the city council. We have a black sheriff. We have a black district attorney. We have a black city solicitor, Shelley Smith. Everett Gillison's the first deputy mayor. We have police commissioners and deputy

commissioners, fire commissioners. One can hardly say that we are not representative of a good part of our population...

We've also had many police officers, as Commissioner Ramsey said the other day, who have been murdered in recent times in Philadelphia. For several years it had nothing to do with anything, just people killing cops. One cop walks in on a robbery at a Dunkin' Donuts. He's just coming in for a cup of coffee or checking the log to show that he stopped by. He gets killed. Another cop is on the corner of Broad and Olney. Some guy who's not right just shoots him and kills him. John Pawlowski. Officer Cassidy. Some officer interrupts a robbery on Spring Garden Street gets shot and killed, Steve Dmytryk...

Citifed: How does a mayor navigate those waters? When you look at what Mayor de Blasio's going through in New York right now, it's difficult. He's offended many members of the FOP up there in his attempt to empathize—

Abraham: I know what he said and I know why he said it. He's married to an African American woman, as many Philadelphians are married interracially. I'm for that. I've married many interracial couples. I've married gay couples. I've married people of different faiths. To me, love trumps everything. If you love somebody it doesn't make any difference to me who your partner or your wife, husband, spouse, or significant other is.

I think what happened was that sometimes in the excitement of the moment you buy into rhetoric which you shouldn't buy into. A mayor has to be able to empathize but not go overboard because, remember, he has 40,000 police officers. I can tell you since you've never...have you ever worn a uniform?

Citifed: No.

Abraham: I'm going to give you an assignment. You put on a police officer's uniform and see how you are treated and then run down a dark alley after somebody. When you tell that person to halt and he not only halts but he turns around. Then what do you do?

It's a whole different story in the darkness of the night when you don't know what's happening. Having said that, I believe that Ferguson and New York City are two different stories altogether. It is not correct that they should be lumped together.

For myself, I don't know why the police were not indicted in the Long Island matter. That was clearly an illegal chokehold. I don't believe the officer intended to kill this overweight guy but where I digress from an officer's standpoint...that man was selling, allegedly, cigarettes. Loosies, you know... You don't arrest anybody for that. That's like a joke...

The Brown case is different... There's an incident where everybody should have had their cell phone camera out taking photographs of this thing as it unfolds. I don't know as a statement of fact what really happened out on that street. I can't say. I wasn't there, don't know.

But obviously the way, leaving the body out on the street for four hours uncovered, it's unconscionable. Unconscionable. The fact that the police department wasn't integrated ... is shameful. It's shameful, so what do you expect? What do you expect?

... We do have a long history of racial issues in this country which are only...we get to a point where we think we're getting better at it but then something happens and the whole thing blows up in our face. We just have to do better. We have to do better.

Citifed: Has your view on the death penalty changed at all?

Abraham: The mayor doesn't have death penalty issues. Let me just say two things. Number one, when I took the oath of office I swore to uphold, defend, and obey the constitution of the United States, the constitution of Pennsylvania, the laws of Pennsylvania. The death penalty is on that.

Second of all, the prosecutor does not impose the death penalty. What the prosecutor does is make a decision that this case does not qualify under the circumstances of the law for the death penalty and leave it to the jury. Actually, what the prosecutor is saying to fellow Philadelphians is, "Look. We're going to ask for the death penalty. They're going to oppose it. We're going to leave it up to you." That's what juries do. Juries decide whether there should or should not be a death penalty. I think that's really the best.

... We haven't really had a death penalty in Pennsylvania for, what, 25 or 30 years. There's no death penalty in Pennsylvania. I think everybody gets all bent out of shape about it but there isn't any. So what are we really talking about?

Citifed: It may be a tiny fraction, but there are cases where inmates on death row have been proven innocent by DNA evidence. Does that give you pause at all?

Abraham: I'm running for mayor. I'm not running for district attorney. I'm finished with that. I've been there and done that. The mayor is interested in taxation, interested in schools, jobs, the economy, infrastructure, getting the city back on strong footing. What I did as a district attorney is past history.

Citifed: One last criminal justice question. Did you see the civil forfeiture ruling in Commonwealth Court this week?

Abraham: I didn't... I can tell you that civil forfeiture was a bill that I fought for. I think it's a good thing. ... Here's what we did. Back in the day when drug dealers and drug gangs were taking over communities the people of the community would come to us and say, "Isn't there anything you can do to get rid of this crack house, this warehouse, this nuisance establishment? Can't you close it down?"

... What we did is we shut down the nuisances and sold the properties and used the proceeds to fund the war on drugs.

Citifed: Given your ideas about education, why wouldn't you support a locally controlled school board—if not an elected one—where the mayor would have more say?

Abraham: I think what's wrong with it is that it's all political. I don't want a city council making a decision of who is going to be elected to the school board so they can do things and interfere. I like the independence of an SRC that is partially the mayor appointees and the rest state controlled.

... If anybody is going to say, "Oh, I can do this in one term," they're either lying or a fool. I don't believe in the sale of the school system, either, to the highest bidder. No.

Citifed: What do you mean by that?

Abraham: The Susquehanna Group... The group, it's not secret, has been supporting Tony Williams because he's a voucher guy. I don't want the schools to be sold. I'll tell you something. I don't think the parents want it. They want quality public education for their kids. That's what they want. That's what people of Philadelphia want.

Citifed: Vouchers are one thing. Charters are a different question and opinions are divided.

Abraham: I think there are some good charters, just like I think there are some good district schools. We've had four or five [charters] just close down, including **Walter Palmer**, **Wakisha** last week, and one or two others. We've had financial mismanagement. We have lots of bad stuff going on with several of them.

I can tell you that I don't want our parents to be misled, thinking if they put their kid in charter schools they're going to get a better education, because by and large that has not happened. I'm not saying there aren't exceptions. There are, but if they had their druthers I think, all parents, they want their kid to have a good quality education, the same as they had.

Citifed: Last question.

Abraham: Yeah, you have to promise me this is your absolute last question.

Citifed: Who do you listen to? Who are your advisors? Who are your friends? Who shapes your thinking?

Abraham: I have a wide circle of friends and people who care about the city and care about me. I won't name names, but business leaders, lawyers, good friends of long standing, scientists. A wide, wide range of people in a variety of areas, because they all inform me of things that have to be considered, that one person cannot do alone...

You listen to your advisors, you listen to your confreres, your advisors and counselors, but at the end of the day you have to make a decision. It has to be a command decision. "We're going to go this way, we're going to go that way, we're going to go the other way." If you're thoughtful

Citifed: The court just tightened restrictions on the use of forfeiture.

Abraham: That's OK with me.

Citifed: That's OK with you?

Abraham: Sure. Listen, remember, as a prosecutor and as a mayor and as a president we're a government of laws. I believe in whatever the court says. Unless it's overturned or successfully challenged on appeal I'm duty bound to follow. I'm a lawyer in good standing because I follow whatever the court says.

Citifed: What would be your jobs and economic health strategy, in broad strokes?

Abraham: Number one, it's part of the educational process where you have to marry not just school but industry. I'd be for turning schools into, from the beginning of a two or three year old, to after school programs, to senior centers, to health centers. All these things all put into one.

Then do what Drexel does... Have kids go on a co-op program where we get an industry to say, OK, what is needed in the industry? Tool and die makers. Drillers. I don't know. Punch press operators. The stuff that aircraft companies and railroad companies might need.

We know that factory workers in the beginning don't get paid very much. Unless you're high up on the factory level, and we don't have many factories in Philadelphia, you're not going to build many factories. Disabuse yourself of the notion that we're going to build any factories again. Those days are not coming back.

Citifed: What about the notion on an energy hub?

Abraham: That's not a factory. What you're doing is building pipes, a railroad, longshoremen, maintenance of pipes, making sure all the technology is there to keep the gas flowing... You have to balance the environment against the pipeline.

Training people for energy jobs is going to be a huge boost to the economy. Longshoremen. A longshoreman in the modern industry can make \$100,000 a year. That's a great job and you don't have to be a college graduate for those people who are not going to go to college.

We are going to encourage, and should encourage, as many people as possible to go to college. Part of that is college ought to start in high school where you learn part of the job while you're also learning your curriculum.... You marry the technology to a job. Then have that as part of the job, a summer job where you're not only going to school as an apprentice after school but you're learning a trade. Trades are changing. Trades are all technology. This is not just taking a hammer and a nail and banging it into a piece of wood. It's much more technologically driven. Electronics, computerization, miniaturization, how to work on robots...

and you've taken the time to listen to other voices and weigh the pros and the cons, you can make a better decision.

Citifed: What's your path to victory in a multi-candidate field, with one black candidate in a majority black city?

Abraham: It's too long a question to answer, and I'm finished.

Citifed: How about a very short answer?

Abraham: You lied to me. You fibbed. Listen, you could go through 1,000 questions. We could go through this all day, but you have more than enough for 20 blogs.

January 6, 2015

Philadelphia Tribune

"Upheaval follows Palmer charter school closure"

Wilford Shamlin, III

Amani Muhammad remembers administrators at her granddaughter's charter school defending their academic track record and explaining bookkeeping practices and accuracy of enrollment records at a public hearing in early fall.

She believed there was little wiggle room for the **Walter D. Palmer** Learning Partners Charter School after the school district initiated proceedings that could strip the school of its authority to operate. But before an administrative hearing officer could rule on the matter, the school abruptly closed on Dec. 31, throwing students and their families into upheaval in the final days of the year. Many parents had to wait until after the new year to enroll their child into a new school.

Muhammad said she wasn't entirely surprised but never expected the news to be delivered during winter break.

"It was devastating, more so for the children because my granddaughter has been in this school since pre-kindergarten," she said. "I know adults can adapt more easily to certain situations."

Sheryl Welton of Northeast Philadelphia had to scramble to register her 15-year-old daughter, after **Palmer** was shuttered in August, and she rushed to register her two youngest, following last week's closure of the lower grades on **Palmer's** former main campus.