An Open Letter to All Who Live or Work in Hartford.

As the Hartford skyline is always a presence on our campus, I find myself reflecting on the October 19th MetroHartford Alliance panel discussion, which contemplated the possibility that the City of Hartford may declare bankruptcy. As a member of the audience, I was grateful for the opportunity to hear from Mayor James Diossa, Don Graves and Kevyn Orr, not only for the information they shared concerning the nuts and bolts of the process of declaring bankruptcy, but also—and especially—for the pride and optimism I felt at being able to learn from the experience and wisdom of those who have been there and done that. While no one wants to be in the fiscal territory we are in, the reality would be far worse if we were unable or unwilling to accurately and forthrightly articulate the state of our city.

Especially when times are tough, a great city needs stalwart advocates and proven friends. Watkinson School is such a friend. Since its founding in 1881, Watkinson School has been a proud part of the city’s landscape, unabashedly proud of our Hartford address. From the school’s earliest days to today, we have treasured the value of “school as community and community as school.” For over 40 years, Hartford elementary school students have called Watkinson home for our SPHERE summer enrichment program; nearly 100 students work, play and learn for five weeks, often jumping two or more grade levels in their reading and math ability. Our decades-long commitment to the Hartford Youth Scholars Program and our partnership with some of the city’s most cherished organizations through our Freshly Squeezed discussion series—Billings Forge, Hartford Stage, and the Mark Twain House—continually reinforce the idea that a truly excellent education requires a school to be part of its larger community.

Our mission states it straight out: At Watkinson, we develop in young people “the power to shape their lives and the world around them.” At its most practical, the world around us IS the city of Hartford. We are two years into a strategic plan that demands authentic and rigorous real-world learning; thus, we are intentionally deepening our involvement with the community: Professional development days take teachers into the city, facilitating the development of programs and curricula that transcend the walls of the school; student participation in Leadership Greater Hartford’s Common Ground and Summer Nexus programs, as well as a student-led “Summit for Students of Color,” help to foster student leadership and connection; our sponsorship of the West End Civic Association’s Farmer’s Market and DineAround make these connections tangible, memorable, and real. The future holds the promise of even more mentorships, internships, mastery projects, and learning experiences that reflect the real challenges of the city we call home.

In short, Watkinson and Hartford are in this together. We are not daunted by the challenges that our city faces; instead, we are inspired and ever more clear. As realistic idealists, we have the energy and vision of committed advocates willing to work with urgency and determination to ensure safe passage through the rough waters we’re in. There’s no better choice we can make than to dig in and dig deep.

Respectfully,

Teri Schrader