

Rochester City Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams to retire

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Rochester City School District Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams will retire at the end of January, she said late Thursday night, ending her tenure six months before her contract runs out and with the district's future very much in flux.

"I love what I do, I love these schools, but from a personal

See [DEANE-WILLIAMS, Page 10A](#)



Barbara Deane-Williams speaks about her retirement as superintendent of the Rochester City School District on Friday, Oct. 19. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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Continued from Page 1A

perspective I had to consider what I wanted to do to contribute, maybe in a different way," she said in an interview Friday morning. "It's a 24/7 job. It requires a great deal of focused attention and energy. I find that exhilarating and love every minute of that, but there comes a time when one has to think about other ways to contribute in significant ways."

She does not have another job lined up, she said, but added: "I failed retirement before; my sense is I will have to find a way to be very involved in the things I have passion for."

She also noted that she just recently turned 62 and has not been receiving the significant pension for which she qualified through her earlier career in public education. She timed her retirement to allow a new superintendent to start at the semester break, before the budget is passed, she said.

Deane-Williams oversaw incremental gains in student outcomes and some improvements in classroom supports for students. Her period of leadership, though, is indelibly marred by both a protracted disaster in special education and, especially, the death of 14-year-old student Trevyan Rowe earlier this year.

Deane-Williams assumed leadership of the district in August 2016 after a protracted interregnum following the departure of Bolgen Vargas. She called it "the opportunity of a lifetime," worth taking even though she had

already retired once.

“Someone has to disrupt and interrupt what is going on here,” she said in early 2017. “The real question that people ask all the time is, can public schools in urban areas be saved? ... And my answer is, I would not have taken the job here as public schools superintendent if I didn’t think Rochester could be the city that tells the story about how this gets done.”

Rather than announcing a set of new academic initiatives, she pledged to tackle head-on the district’s legendary inefficiency. “Coherence” and “relational capacity” became the keystones. That resulted most prominently in the Path Forward, a sprawl of task forces, listening tours and reports that seemed to peter out after a presentation earlier this year; more than a year’s worth of work on student placement patterns, for instance, has lost any public momentum.

The deputy superintendent overseeing the Path Forward initiative, Bo Wright, left in June to become superintendent in Rush-Henrietta, one of the many high-level departures that plagued the Deane-Williams administration from the onset. Her two current deputy superintendents are the fourth and fifth of her tenure.

The graduation rate and test score results have improved over the last several years, though both remain among the lowest in the state. Kodak Park School 41 was forced to close last year and the district expects many schools to be added to the receivership list when it is announced later this year.

Deane-Williams continued Vargas’ practice of adding social workers and other support staff even in the face of budget challenges. That earned her a mostly positive relationship with labor unions but also contributed to an apparently untenable budget situation; the district’s reserves are nearly depleted and the structural deficit remains daunting as ever.

“I have worked with over a dozen superintendents and none of them had greater respect for the collective wisdom of teachers than Barbara Deane-Williams,” Rochester Teachers Association Adam Urbanski said, adding he was disappointed to hear the news. “They knew that even in tough fiscal budget years she focused on classrooms and providing support for teachers.”

By resigning now Deane-Williams avoids the prospect of an unsuccessful bid for a contract extension in negotiations with the school board. The board’s newly elected members — Natalie Sheppard, Beatriz LeBron and Judith Davis, who won last month’s primary and will take office in January — have taken an aggressive stance toward the administration and seemed unlikely to approve an extension.

“She just wasn’t the right fit for us,” Sheppard said. “How we operate internally needs to be revamped from left to right.”

School Board President Van White thanked Deane-Williams for her attention to equity and school climate, among other things, but downplayed the significance of her departure, saying instead it was the district families, staff and school board that would continue to drive improvements.

He also said he does not anticipate the district will struggle to find qualified candidates, first as interim superintendent and then as a permanent hire, which he hopes to have in place by September.

“We’re a good district with good people,” he said. “And people want to be part of a district that’s transforming itself.”

What is more, several pieces of bad news are almost certainly on the horizon for the district. Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino’s first report on the district will likely be released within the next week or two and top district officials are bracing for sharp criticism, particularly in the fields of financial management and special education.

The state investigation into Rowe's death will also likely be released soon and surely will not paint the district in a favorable light. The state Education Department will release the receivership list by the end of the year and the district will soon enter into a consent decree over its perpetually inadequate special education program.

In a statement, state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia said in part: "Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams accepted the great challenge to improve teaching and learning in Rochester and I thank her for her service and dedication to the students of the Rochester City School District. I wish her well as she starts her next chapter."

State Education Department spokeswoman Emily DeSantis said Aquino would "support the board in its effort to recruit high-quality candidates for the position and help ensure a smooth transition." She said Aquino himself is not a candidate for the job.

Deane-Williams pledged to help the board during its transition to a new leader, including in supporting Aquino's recommendations. She said the next superintendent should continue to focus on relationships and coherence as well as finances.

Her replacement will be the fourth superintendent in the last 10 years, not counting three interim appointments. No superintendent has lasted more than four years since Clifford Janey from 1996 to 2002.

"Rochester is a special place," Deane-Williams wrote in an email to staff, "and I have great hope for the future of our schools."

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