

**Expert: RCSD needs reset**

**Aquino says decisions seem to be made in interests of adults, not the children**

**Justin Murphy**

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester City School District needs a complete reset on how it operates, according to a 61-page report by the state-appointed consultant released Wednesday.

The majority of the 106 findings and 84 recommendations from distinguished educator Jaime Aquino stem from unstable and unsteady leadership, starting with the superintendent and emanating down through the central office administration. Decisions in the district, he wrote, most often seem to be made with the interests of adults, not children, in mind.

“The system’s failure to deliver highquality education to all its students has resulted in teachers, principals, central office administrators, and even some board commissioners and the mayor seeking alternative educational settings for their own children,” Aquino wrote.

Among the report’s recommendations:

- The school board must better understand its role of creating policy and overseeing the budget

superintendents will be run out of town.

- The district must settle on a common curriculum in all subject areas, prioritizing literacy and mathematics. Currently schools are allowed to create their own curricula, leading to wide variance in what students of the same age are learning when. Aquino noted that some past curriculumwriting efforts have apparently gone for naught.

- The district must reevaluate the organizational structure to encourage efficiency as well as collaboration and reestablish a clear chain of command, and develop multiyear strategic and financial plans aligned with the district’s instructional priorities.

and interfere less in the day-to-day operation of the district. One person Aquino interviewed said the board’s current interventionist style all but guarantees that



**The Rochester distinguished educator’s report was released and discussed with the media by state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia, left, distinguished educator Jaime Aquino and Board of Regents Chancellor Betty A. Rosa. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**

The report does acknowledge recent slight progress on graduation rates, math and English Language Arts 3-8 test scores and a pre-K program that is best-in-class nationwide. It also noted increased enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses by 25 percent.

“Talented, hardworking, and committed staff members at the board, central office, and in the schools, as well as committed community members, give this district the potential to become a high-functioning organization,” Aquino wrote.

■ Communication in general needs a full overhaul in every direction: from central office to building staff, from teachers and principals to parents and students, and even within the highest level of leadership.

None of these goals can realistically be achieved without consistent leadership. The current instability, Aquino wrote, “reduces the district’s ability to focus on implementing educational reforms that would better prepare students for college and/or careers. Each superintendent brings a new vision and seeks to implement new programs, but when a superintendent exits, the system typically abandons initiatives just as they are beginning to take hold.”

Aquino’s observations, for the most part, were not novel — the lack of coordination at central office or the failures of special education, to name two, are the stuff of local legend. What is new is the authority that Aquino carries in making them — he reports not to the board or superintendent but to state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia, who has an enviable array of prods at her disposal should the district fail to move on the report’s recommendations.

“With (this) framework in place, it is now time for the district, the school board and Dr. Aquino to work together to implement strategies that will allow Rochester’s children to reach their full potential,” Elia said in a statement. She was in Rochester on Wednesday to deliver the results of the report in person to the school board.

“I don’t think there’s anything in there that any commissioner should be surprised about, to be honest with you. One thing about the distinguished educator is that he’s been very transparent with the board and staff about things that were going into the report,” said board Commissioner Beatriz LeBron.

Commissioner Cynthia Elliott said that, based on her conversation with Elia and Chancellor Betty Rosa, she agrees with most of Aquino’s recommendations and proposed action steps.

“I think we’re on the same page, in all honesty,” she said. “At this time it’s very embarrassing ... but I also look at it as an opportunity. If we’re open to these kinds of changes, and bring the district up to meet our vision for it.”

The document is a culmination of meetings with stakeholders, input from focus groups and a

Aquino was at pains Wednesday to acknowledge that everyone in the district was working hard, but the absence of a unified sense of direction meant that those efforts were not making a difference in the classroom, and that budgets were also not solely to blame.

“I hope I’ve made clear in the report that the poor student achievement in this district, is not the result of a lack of funding,” Aquino said. “Over a period of years you see that the focus (of the district) hasn’t been on students,” said state Commissioner Elia. Elia left the option of a complete restructuring of the district on the table. Chancellor Rosa said that could include redefining the roles of the board and the superintendent, another issue addressed by Aquino. “Stakeholders said board commissioners need to be reminded that the board’s main responsibilities include making policy, overseeing the budget, and selecting and evaluating the superintendent. When board commissioners assume management responsibilities, that undermines the superintendent’s role. Day-to-day operations should be left to the superintendent,” Aquino wrote.

According to state law the district now must get back by Feb. 8 with a plan of how it would implement Aquino’s recommendations, or outline its reasons for not following them.

Board Vice President Willa Powell said she thought Aquino’s findings were “measured and balanced” but noted that many were based in what had been reported to him by staff members or other people who may have had their own interests in mind.

“I’m sure we have the opportunity to rebut any one of the 84 points that were made. We’re going to have to take them one at a time. Where his findings are grounded in law and experience, we’ll have to have some come-to-Jesus moments.”

Aquino will also provide quarterly updates on his progress and is in regular communication with Elia. There is no set expiration date for his service; Hempstead, the only other district in the state with a distinguished educator, just saw his appointment extended.

Aquino has experience in Los Angeles, Denver and Hartford, Connecticut, and was appointed as distinguished educator this summer after the initial pick, Kenneth Eastwood, pulled out.

comprehensive review of the district's instructional systems and operations. *JMURPHY7@Gannett.*

*co m*

**Lack of unified vision**