

BOARD PUSHES BACK ON AQUINO REPORT

Language, conclusions of educator’s review of school district questioned

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester school board Thursday tempered its previous enthusiasm for the work of distinguished educator Jaime Aquino, with members saying in a press conference they rejected some of his premises and foresaw conflict over competing visions of the board’s role in governing the district.

Aquino’s report pointed to, among other things, failures in leadership by both the board and the district administration. He said the system is oriented toward adults, not children, and recommended a monumental restructuring.

Board President Van White rejected those conclusions, questioned the way Aquino arrived at them and criticized the language he used in doing so.

“Words like ‘reset’ — that’s so subjective; you don’t know what that means,” he said. “Words like ‘indictment’ ... my God, why use such a phrase? That is not a responsible word to use. It’s



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Democrat & Chronicle

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Aquino said the board needs to better understand its role of supporting the superintendent rather than micromanaging the district; White and board member Natalie Sheppard said that’s not a recommendation they intend to follow.

employees who aren’t meeting standards.

White and Vice President Willa Powell both said they would have liked to see more data in the report versus anecdotal evidence; Aquino addressed that point earlier in the day, saying he had “triangulated everything” and chosen only anecdotes that illustrated wider trends.

“I definitely do think there will be tension there,” Sheppard said. “The fact of the matter is, the board right now is strongly opinionated individuals.”

White added: “Dr. Aquino has a certain point of view about what board members are to do. ... I don’t have any problem looking at the (state education) statute and saying this is my legal responsibility and executing it and letting the chips falls where they may.”

The board and district have until February to create an action plan based on Aquino’s recommendations. They do not have a free hand in doing so — any points of difference with his findings require a written explanation that Commissioner Mar yEllen Elia can either accept or reject. She has the ultimate authority to escalate punitive action against the district, including appointing an overseer. In an interview with the *Democrat and Chronicle* editorial board Thursday, Aquino said the district had “lost generations of children” due to its ineptitude. Talented educators, he said, are being held back by inefficient processes and leadership churn.

The school board in particular bears responsibility as the elected governing body, he said. But, as he noted in its report, that does not mean the board should intrude on the proper responsibilities of the district. Sheppard, meanwhile, said: “We do get superintendents that come in and feel the board is micromanaging ... but with so many things going awry, I’m not going to be hands-off.”

She said she wished Aquino had laid out a vision for accountability, in particular the board’s ability to remove individual

Board member Beatriz LeBron said she was glad to read Aquino’s tough words and, as has been the case throughout the year, stressed the distinction between the three board members who joined in 2018 and the “old guard.”

“I think the board has collectively forgotten some of its function and has become a gatekeeper for some of the dysfunction in this district,” she said. “We would not have a distinguished educator if the district wasn’t in the disarray that it’s in.”

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