

An uneven welcome

Aquino

Jaime Aquino hears from community members at RCSD board meeting

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Jaime Aquino is only a week into his tenure as distinguished educator for the Rochester City School District, and already he's found that some people don't find him very distinguished at all.

He attended his first school board meeting Thursday and was confronted with a room of two dozen community members who questioned the \$150-an-hour consulting fee he'll be drawing while doing the work to which state Education Commissioner Mary-Ellen Elia appointed him.

"It's a joke — a very, very expensive one," said Howard Eagle, in an address that nearly drained the battery from the beeper indicating his time was up. "And apparently (Elia) knew you all wouldn't resist because politically you're too weak-kneed. ... She'd never dream of trying a stunt like this in a lily-white suburban school district because they'd get

See **AQUINO**, Page **6A**



Jaime Aquino's task is to conduct an 'intensive review of district and school systems, structures, operations and facilities,' and to develop a large-scale action plan. PHOTOS BY MAX SCHULTE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Howard Eagle says the hiring of distinguished educator Jaime Aquino is “a joke — a very, very expensive one.”

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Continued from Page 1A

out their pitchforks and drive her clean out of office.”

“A person, in 45 days, is going to write up an analysis of this school district and he isn’t even a member of the district,” another speaker, David Walling, said. “What I see happening is, the board is not doing their job — your job — that you should be doing. ... If you don’t like the idea, then push back.”

In a certain sense, Aquino agreed with his critics.

“I don’t like the terms “distinguished” and “educator,” Aquino said before the meeting. “I’m just a teacher. I’m here to facilitate a conversation about how we make each school a place of excellent education.”

Aquino, born in the Dominican Republic, has been a top administrator in Los Angeles, Denver and Hartford, Connecticut, schools. He was reportedly considered for the opening as school chancellor in New York City and most recently worked for a nonprofit educational leadership training organization, New Leaders for New Schools.

His task is to conduct an “intensive review of district and school systems, structures, operations and facilities,” and to develop a large-scale action plan based on those findings. His first benchmark is an initial report due by mid-October.

“It’s always good to have fresh eyes and a different perspective; sometimes when you’re so embedded in the work you might not be able to see some of the issues having an impact on student achievement,” he said. “It’s not just me writing a report. I’m the type of person who’s hands-on, and I’m going to be rolling up my sleeves.” The welcome for Aquino, at least within the district, has been warmer than it was for his would-be predecessor, Kenneth Eastwood, who had no experience in large urban school districts and had previously applied, unsuccessfully, to become Rochester’s superintendent. “Most of us on the board see (Aquino) as an ally, and someone not just another pair of hands on deck but also to communicate to commissioner obstacle to changes and improvements she wants to see,” Powell said. “Change is hard and sometimes Albany stands in the way.”

The district does not know exactly how much Aquino will end up costing. He said he’ll work about four days a week for the first few months then likely scale back to three days a week by the winter. For Eastwood the

district had budgeted about \$200,000.

In that case the board and Eastwood could not agree on contract terms. In this case, board member Willa Powell said, Elia actually sent both sides a range for an appropriate salary in order to pre-empt any dispute.

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