

Was school put in a position to succeed?

Planning

On May 15, Christine Caluorie-Poles was hired as principal of RISE Community School, the school that will replace the chronically low-performing School 41, in the same building on West Ridge Road.

Caluorie-Poles has had about three and a half months to prepare for the first day of school, which is Wednesday. Education leaders disagree over whether that is enough time for a principal to create a significant improvement over School 41, where fewer than 10 percent of students passed their 2018 state tests.

RISE Community School will be the 19th school that Rochester has opened since 2002. In the past, the process has not yielded good results.

The district started planning the new school in January, after the state decided to close School 41. Rochester City School Board President Van White has called the state-imposed timeline for opening this new school “unreasonable.”

White said the most successful school transformation the district has seen

in the past decade is East High School, which was

See **PLANNING, Page 7A**



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Continued from Page 1A

taken over by the University of Rochester. The plan for that school’s transformation developed over a year, said White. “If you talk about closing a school and reopening it within six months, don’t be surprised if you don’t get the results you say you want.”

State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia said that waiting was not an option when children were trapped in failing classrooms. “Rochester should be running out of patience.”

Leaders at The Mind Trust, a nonprofit organization that supports school development in Indianapolis, believe that principals need between one and two years to plan a successful school.

community where the school is located. She hosted community meetings every other week and held events at the school to attract families and neighbors and build excitement about the new school.

High-performing school leaders need substantial time to plan their schools, said Brown. “This lesson hasn’t been learned in a lot of cities and we keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again.”

Elia said that more planning time for the RISE Community School school would be ideal, but it is not practical to spend two years planning when you have kids stuck in classrooms where less than 10 percent are meeting state standards. “If you want to take two years to plan for a school, what happens in those two years with the kids?” she asked.

In the past, Elia has pointed to the Walton Avenue School in the Bronx as an example of a school that

Since 2014, the Mind Trust has supported the formation of 20 schools in the Indianapolis Innovation Network. The majority were converted from failing schools. A one- to two-year new school incubation period is at the core of its efforts.

“You can’t restart a school over summer break,” said Mind Trust CEO Brandon Brown. “It is imperative to take the time on the front end to get the planning right.”

During this incubation period, principals are given a fellowship that allows them to focus all their attention on school design, planning and community engagement.

Mariama Carson, who is the principal of Global Preparatory Academy, has restarted two Indianapolis schools. The first, she restarted without the benefit of extended planning time. She was able to take that school from a D on the Indianapolis growth rating metric to a B.

As a Mind Trust fellow, Carson was given two years to plan the opening of Global Preparatory Academy, a pre-K-6 school of about 600 students in Indianapolis. This school replaced Riverside 44, a school with an F rating. In its first year of existence, Global Preparatory Academy received an A on the growth rating metric.

“I don’t think there is any way we could have had this level of success without that planning time,” she said. “I have done it both ways and I know clearly that having planning time is critical.”

School incubation

During her two-year fellowship, Carson spent significant time studying the data of the school she was replacing, in order to see gaps and need and to create “a plan of attack,” she said.

She visited successful schools in other parts of the country, including Oakland, Austin, Philadelphia and South Dakota. She spent six weeks in Mexico to gain knowledge about bilingual education.

These travels helped her build a network of people across the country who could provide her with advice and assistance. “These are people I can reach out to five years later,” she said.

Carson also used the planning time to build relationships in the

successfully replaced a failing school. Its principal, Daniel Russo, spent three months creating the proposal for this school. After it was approved, he went through a five-month intensive principal training program. He had two additional months for school-based planning and set up.

“It’s hard to say what would be the ideal amount of planning time because launching a school encompasses so much,” Russo said. “I would imagine that even the most focused leaders could always benefit from just a little more time.”

Elia notes that the RISE Community School is better off than some other Rochester schools have been because its staffing will be completely in place before the first day of school.

She believes that independent monitor Frances Wilson, whom the state has placed over the school, will help the school succeed where others have failed. The school also has a good plan and an experienced principal.

“Those are the kind of things that are going to make this as immediate as it needs to be.”

Caluorie-Poles says RISE Community School is ready to go. The staff has just been through two weeks of intensive professional development and are excited to start the year.

“It’s an amazing opportunity,” she said. “We are ready for the kids.”

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Second-grader Chaos Rhodes and his father, Henry Rhodes, visit RISE Community School before the start of the school year. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

