

Funchess, LeBron, Davis candidates for RCSD board

Justin Murphy Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Eight months of appointed service on the Rochester school board is enough to make Melanie Funchess and Beatriz LeBron the veteran incumbents in the Democratic primary Sept. 13, as they face a political novice, the Rev. Judith Davis, in a contest for two seats. None of the three have any previous political experience. Funchess and LeBron have been serving on the board since January, when they were appointed to fill partial terms vacated by Mary Adams and Malik Evans. The winners in November will need to run again in 2019 for full four-year terms, if they wish.

Funchess has a long history with the district as a parent and community partner in her professional role as a mental health advocate. The most important change she hopes to enact is an increased commitment from adults to support children materially and emotionally.

At the same time, she leads a boardcommunity task force on special education that is now coming up with action steps to stave off a class action lawsuit. Its broad composition and careful process should serve as a model for the district's work elsewhere, she said.

"There are technical (priorities) like special education — we need to get stuff aligned," she said. "Then there are adaptive things. We need to get people to recognize how their thoughts, actions and behaviors impact our kids. ... We have what we need to turn the district around right here at home, but we need to believe in our kids."

LeBron came onto the board promising to advocate in particular for the most vulnerable children, including Latinos, and has been involved in the district's efforts to organize programs for the hundreds of students arriving from Puerto Rico.

She made the biggest splash, though, with a letter to City Council, essentially asking them to reject the district's \$915 million budget over concerns about excessive spending. She warned that the district was heading toward bankruptcy and could not sustain the amount of fund balance it was using.

City Council did end up passing the budget but has now pledged to keep closer track of the district's finances, something LeBron said is her top priority as well.

"I've exposed some of the issues with the finances, but we need to do a deeper dive as far as where money is going and how certain departments and positions are being funded," she said, naming the use of consultants as an area for reductions. "The structural deficit that we have year-after-year — that's not a normal thing for a district to have, but it's become normal here."

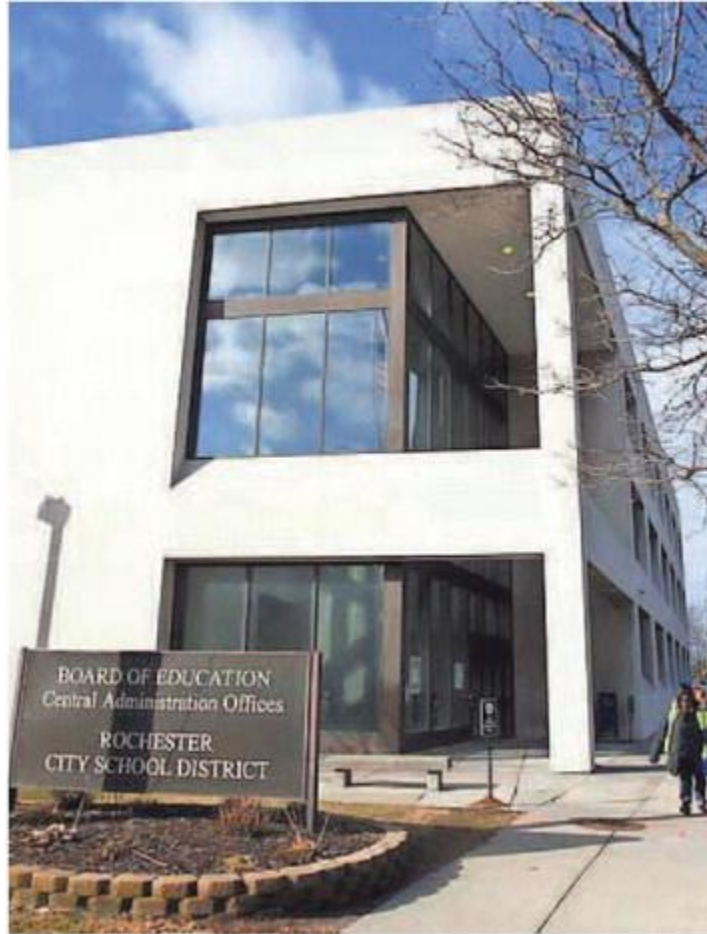
Davis is the challenger among the three candidates but also has significant recent experience working with the district from the outside as a leading member of the Movement for Anti-racist Ministry and Action. She is an ordained minister with "a doctorate in being a person of color in the United States," and said her study of racism in education and the church makes her best qualified to help lead the district's work on the issue.

Part of that work, she said, would be organizing parents and other community members and ensuring their voices are heard throughout the decision-making process, not just at the beginning, particularly in regards to the Racial Equity Action and Leadership team.

"We need a joint table, and to stay at that table together and develop a plan that we all participate in, all have a role in and all have accountability for," she said. "I don't see that right now."

The primary election is Thursday, Sept. 13, with polls open from noon to 9 p.m.

There are no other candidates running in November, though LeBron is also nominated on the Working Families party line. Each of the seven board members earn \$27,033 per year, with the board president earning an additional \$7,725.



The Rochester City School District headquarters. STAFF FILE PHOTO 2011