

## Attendees at RCSD forum express skepticism

Many ask what will state do when district fails?

### Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The level of public confidence in the Rochester City School District's ability to respond to the distinguished educator's report can be measured by the number of times a single question recurred during a forum Thursday night at Wilson Commencement: What is the state Education Department going to do once the school board and district fail?

State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia and the two local Regents, T. Andrew Brown and Wade Norwood, didn't have a concrete answer; the question will need to wait at least until Feb. 8, when the board's response to Jaime Aquino's recommendations is due.

The other recurring point was that Aquino's report, which outlines a wide variety of institutional failures in the district, contains very little new information.

"What's most alarming is what I've heard: 'I'm not surprised,'" Brown said. "There should be a level of outrage. ... That by itself is deeply troubling."

Some of the main points that Aquino noted in his report, and again Thursday:

#### ■ Decision-making is driven mostly

by the needs of adults.

#### ■ The board lacks understanding of its role as a governing body and is deeply fragmented.

#### ■ The entire community has low expectations for students, rooted in racism.

#### ■ There is a lack of accountability at all levels and a high leadership turnover rate.

In initial comments after Aquino's report was released, the board accepted some of his findings but pushed back against others, mainly the charge that the board has overreached. Several suggested they didn't intend to abide by Aquino's recommendations in that regard; board member Beatriz LeBron, who has the opposite

to concoct some new form of sanction, if necessary.

"If the board can't work together then the problems won't be fixed, and quite frankly we'll have to take much more aggressive involvement than has ever been taken in the city of Rochester," he said.

The goal, of course, is to avoid any such escalation. Parents and others in attendance spoke of the need to support parents, to hold teachers and administrators accountable and to consider the district's problems in the greater context of poverty and segregation.

Elia and Aquino acknowledged the impact of poverty but said there are nonetheless steps the district could take to improve results. When asked, neither offered examples of districts that have succeeded in a broad sense despite challenges such as those that Rochester faces.

Norwood endorsed the idea that solutions for RCSD need to extend beyond city limits in some sense and said it would likely involve a legislative solution at the state level.

"(If) any of you think a speak-out, a couple of meetings and a vote are going to change things — don't fool yourself," he said.

Elia also said the attorney general's investigation into the death of 14-year-old Trevyan Rowe will be released to the public in the next two or three weeks.

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**The Rochester distinguished educator's report was released and discussed with the media by, from left, state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia, Jaime Aquino and Board of Regents Chancellor**

opinion, said she wouldn't have been willing to attach her name to the first draft of the board's response.

**Betty A. Rosa.** JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER  
DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Elia mentioned extending Aquino's term in Rochester or instituting greater oversight of district finances as possible consequences if she doesn't believe the board's response is sufficient; Brown said further that the state could reach beyond existing regulations and ask the Legislature