

role

Mayor seeks bigger school

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Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren released a report this week indicating widespread community support for her taking a more active role in the operation of the Rochester City School District, laying the groundwork for an unspecified step toward more mayoral control over the schools.

The report gathered feedback from students, parents and others who attended a series of community forums that Warren convened in response to distinguished educator Jaime Aquino's review of the district. They responded to questions that seemed tailored to prove support for Warren's prized initiatives as well as her taking a more activist stance — with or without the



Mayor Lovely Warren reads to students at School 33 in Rochester. MAX SCHULTE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO

district's consent.

"I can say without a doubt the mayor is looking to take on more of a role here," her chief of staff, Alex Yudelson, said Tuesday.

He did not specify what that expanded role might look like but said the city has had "informal conversations" with legislators, state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia and others on the subject. The mayor is waiting for the school board's response to Aquino, due Feb. 8, to decide what action to propose, Yudelson said.

"If there are areas where they don't seem willing or able to implement his recommendations, those are areas we might want to step in," he said. "If it looks like they aren't going to accept any of his recommendations or don't portray a plan to really be able to do that, that might be a different conversation."

The report highlights tension with the school board as a factor driving instability at the superintendent position and otherwise. That instability has "reached a breaking point," Yudelson said.

community-based approach at School 17, where the majority of students now come from the surrounding JOSANA neighborhood.

At the same time her support for school choice, including charter schools, has been largely theoretical, and her attempt to carve out a role in the state's receivership model was rebuffed. Warren and outgoing RCSD Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams have interacted little in public, though the relationship was less rancorous than Warren's with previous Superintendent Bolgen Vargas had been. The mayor's public comments about RCSD have been mostly critical, in particular concerning its actions related to the death of student Trevyan Rowe after he left School 12, but also with regard to student transportation.

Many of the people attending the mayor's forums or responding to a telephone survey said they wanted city government, and Warren in particular, to "work in a closer, more formal partnership with our schools."

That included greater oversight of the budget process but also "holding the board accountable" for schools meeting "certain performance measures."

“It’s clear there isn’t an environment right now where the superintendent (is) going to stay for that long,” he said. “There’s a power vacuum. It’s clearly the right time; frankly, it’s *been* the right time.”

The mayor’s report suggests the idea of an agreement between RCSD and the city regarding efficiencies like facilities management or data sharing, but Yudelson said more aggressive action — for instance, pushing for a legislative change to grant greater authority to the mayor — is “not off the table.” That could include, or at least approach, the mayoral control in which Warren repeatedly has disavowed an interest.

School Board President Van White said he had not yet seen the mayor’s report but welcomed her continued involvement. He pushed back, though, on the idea of drafting the board’s response to Aquino’s recommendations with the goal of appeasing either her or the state Education Department.

“What we are (writing) in our response to the distinguished educator’s report is what we believe is necessary for the children and families of this district,” he said. “That’s the only litmus test. Not what (Warren) might do; not what the commissioner might do; but what we might do to make a difference in the lives of our children and families.”

Warren has been elected twice on a platform of vigorous involvement with local education but has yet to find, or create, an overarching framework for doing so. She touts the expansion and greater coordination of early education in the city as well as the holistic

“The mayor needs to have a greater role in holding the board accountable — change the city charter if needed,” one respondent said. Another said Warren “should work with the school principals, not just with central office, to make things happen.”

The community forum report also praised the new school facilities built through the city and district’s Joint School Modernization Program; criticized the school board for “micromanaging what is going on in the classrooms;” and said that while more wraparound services such as mental health are needed, the solution does not necessarily lie in more funding for the district. All those observations echo the city’s general position; Yudelson said the mayor was not surprised to hear them. Students, in particular, said they felt stereotyped and underestimated by their mostly white educators. They asked for greater emphasis on relationship-building and less on discipline. “The metal detectors, police officers, hall sweeps and cafeteria food all make me feel like I’m in a prison,” one student said. Community members said the teachers and staff at schools are dedicated and caring but should be more diverse, or better trained in cultural competency. They also pointed to the negative effects of structural racism and said parents are not valued as partners in education.

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