

Rochester Board of Education failing the district

Not long ago, when I first considered seeking a Rochester school board seat, my self-assessment was simple: I had dedicated my work life to the arts and teaching. I had earned a doctorate and could offer an educator's perspective as a member of the board. Perhaps more importantly, I had helped navigate my two children through the tangled routes the Rochester city schools can require. And I cared about our schools.

When voters chose me, my hopes were also simple: Join with other commissioners, set clear goals, and work as a team to support the administration in pursuit of continual district improvement. Today, as my time on the school board moves rapidly to its end, I recognize that few of my goals have been reached. Even more sadly, I must admit that the recent assessment by stateappointed Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino, devastating as it was, is, in my view, largely accurate.

Not all is lost, however. There are many hard-working, gifted educators in this school district. We've made steps toward framing institutional racism through an equity policy, a code of conduct and restorative practices. We've created a steady drumbeat of awareness about the importance of white people taking responsibility for their biases. Every year, through every term, great teaching and learning occurs. I remain grateful for the many talented educators who touch so many children's lives.

Despite this and by virtually every measure, we are not delivering results worthy of the budget expended each year.

Looking back on my term, I've come to the conclusion that the major impediment to turning this ship around lies with me and my fellow commissioners. When I was elected, I found disparate individuals working independently, often attacking and undermining an administration that had just been put in place. Meetings were frequently contentious — frustrating for all and not a recipe for success. It's clear to me that the elected board has been letting down this district.

In completing my term in public service, I've struggled to come to grips with how this crisis in local education should be addressed. There are three often-discussed alternatives in cities

like Rochester:

■ Have the state appoint a distinguished educator to assume direct oversight of the district. The school board could remain as an advisory institution while the superintendent reported directly with state professionals to move toward state standards of performance.

■ Work with the current board governance model and retrain commissioners to learn their roles, emphasizing the need for each player to stay in their proper lanes. Collegiality and collaboration would have to be focused toward supporting strong building leaders, classroom teachers and good, measurable results for our children.

I'd like to think the third option could be achieved, but there is little over the past three years that has given me hope that we commissioners can overcome divisive politics on our own and assume responsibility for working as a team. I'm afraid it may take outside powers to right this ship.

I urge parents, business leaders, and politicians to move away from an easy blame game, instead joining the district in finding ways to support the successful education of all our children. In the end, leadership is a mirror to the public, and success certainly starts with our critical willingness to work collaboratively across the deep rifts within this community.

Elizabeth Hallmark has been a commissioner on the Rochester city school board since 2016. She is an adjunct professor at Nazareth and Monroe Community colleges.



Liz Hallmark

Guest Columnist

Looking back on my term, I've come to the conclusion that the major impediment to turning this ship around lies with me and my fellow commissioners.

■ Abolish the school board and have the mayor hire and evaluate the superintendent. While the mixing of education and politics offends some, it could have clearer accountability where a superintendent is insulated from the inconsistent guidance of untethered school board members.