

Divided RCSD board gives response to Aquino

Steps pledged to rectify problems

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A divided Rochester school board Wednesday approved a response to Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino's report on the district, pledging a series of steps to rectify the problems he identified.

The vote to approve the collectively drafted document was 4 to 2 with commissioners Judith Davis and Natalie Sheppard opposed. Beatriz Le-Bron was absent. The response answers Aquino's 84 findings with 110 pages of densely packed promises. Many of them focused on the need for professional development for board members, administrators and teachers; it also recognized that some goals cannot be achieved without changes in union contracts.

Drafting the document took two months of board meetings and public hearings, some of them contentious. In that period Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams stepped down as scheduled, school board President Van White announced he will run for City Court judge in the fall, and Liz Hallmark, who will not run for reelection, wrote an essay casting doubt on the board's ability to solve the district's ills without substantial intervention from the city or state.

Mayor Lovely Warren encouraged that line of thinking last month, issuing a report that laid the groundwork for a bid for greater mayoral control. Both she and state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia have said repeatedly that they are ready to become more involved, without saying in what form. As its critics hover ever closer, the board has bristled. White and others pushed back on Aquino's assessment that they were micromanaging the administration. Rather, they said, it is the elected board that can best carry out the public's vision for district improvement.

Part of their reasoning is that the school board can remain intact while superintendents come and go. For the last two years, though, that stability has been strictly theoretical. Three of the seven commissioners have been in place for

less than 18 months and four seats, including Hallmark's, are up for election in 2019, not including the one White would vacate if he wins a judgeship. Sheppard said she did not support sending in the document because of poor communication and wasted time while the work was being done. In particular, she said she wanted to see greater emphasis on the need for the district to wrest some control back from unions.

"We know the collective bargaining unit agreements are problematic for what we're trying to do," she said. "If we don't put that in the report and the state doesn't back us up on that, where does that leave us?" Davis said she was bothered that the district lacks a strong overall strategic plan and other fundamental documents. Without those, she said, it would be impossible to accurately answer Aquino's points.

White said the document was comprehensive given the short time frame but said it was a "living, breathing document" that could be amended over time. "There's not a person in here who believes this document doesn't need to be revised," he said. "To the extent it isn't satisfactory — we'll get there."

The board response goes to Elia, who can accept it or send it back for edits. Aquino, meanwhile, will write quarterly progress reports on how well the district is following its own plan.

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Board member Natalie Sheppard, right, disagreed with the response to Jaime Aquino, left. MAX SCHULTE / ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO

