

RCSD board response to Aquino: what does it say?

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For two months the families of the Rochester City School District — not to mention the state Education Department and Mayor Lovely Warren, among others — have been waiting to see how the school board would respond to Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino’s November report.

They formally did so Wednesday, two days before the deadline. So what did they say?

Much like Aquino’s report, the response refers in great detail to teaching and learning, finance, governance and other specialized topics in education. It has only a short introductory section and no quote-worthy political statements.

It does, though, lay out a series of goals the board and district now must accomplish under Aquino’s watch. Among them:

- Create an overall strategic plan, a “master plan” for English language learners and a long-term financial plan.
- Take specific steps to ensure that data is used well in all facets of the organization, from the classroom to the budget office.
- Begin to use district teachers to grade state exams for grades 3-8 rather than contracting the job out.
- Change the master schedule so that all teachers have time for common planning time and restorative practices work, among other things.
- Establishing a pipeline for potential principals and central office administrators, including a “leadership academy” for staff in June 2020.

The document goes to state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia for her review. Aquino, meanwhile, will issue his first quarterly report later this month.

Board members Judith Davis and Natalie Sheppard voted against adopting the response. Davis cited several concerns, including that the response was

multiple mandatory retreats. It will establish an orientation process for new board members and assign them mentors.

When needed, board members and top administrators will participate in restorative peace circles, just as district students do.

Aquino: The district lacks both a common curriculum for all its students and a well-understood, overarching instructional framework.

Response: RCSD does in fact have an established instructional framework, but the response acknowledges it is “not widely understood.” The district will “review, inventory and analyze” the framework and create an implementation and communication plan, including giving all teachers common planning time.

Regarding curriculum, the district will use a broad panel of teachers and administrators to examine all the different curricula in place in its schools, including the one that East High School recently developed and another recently designed to be culturally responsive in grades K-2. The goal is to have uniform curriculum in place by the 2020-21 school year.

Aquino: “Leaders must apply the necessary fiscal due diligence to achieve efficiencies and costs in daily operations.”

Response: The district pledged to implement all the recommendations from a pointed 2017 audit of its financial office. It will also “develop a long-term financial plan with community input that aligns the district’s instructional priorities with fiscal reality.”

Aquino: “Continue with anti-bias training but ensure that it leads to specific changes in behavior and teaching and leadership practices.”

Response: The district will contract with a well known team of experts to develop means of assessing the effectiveness of its anti-bias and anti-racism training, including measuring suspension rates, advanced coursework enrollment and special education referrals in greater detail.

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drafted by top-level administrators and board members without much participation from a wider swath of the community.

“If the response was developed without (all stakeholders’) input or buy-in, how is the district going to procure their buy-in after the fact?” she asked in a letter she will submit to Elia.

Sheppard’s main concern was that the document should have spelled out more clearly the need for changes in union contracts. She said she wanted to ask the state for its support of the district in bargaining, including changing applicable laws if necessary.

“Because contracts are legally binding, I believe we need the state-level leadership to take a more aggressive approach in ensuring that the set laws are not negatively impacting the district’s ability to make the necessary adjustments to improve our student outcomes,” she wrote in a statement.

Here are several other points that Aquino made in his report along with the proposed action steps that the board

adopted.:

Aquino: The school board lacks a “common understanding of governance as opposed to management” and does not allow the administration autonomy in day-to-day decision-making.

Response: The board committed to a series of professional development sessions, an annual professional development plan and



Among other things, Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino said the school board does not allow the administration autonomy in day-to-day decision-making. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE