

Warren advises schools on spending

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Increasingly emboldened to take action on education in the city, Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren last week wrote a letter to interim RCSD Superintendent Dan Lowengard directing the district to spend a large portion of the \$119 million the city provides to it on community schools and early literacy efforts.

That sum of \$119 million, known as the maintenance of effort, has long been

controversial, since the city is required to provide it to the district but has no say under state or local law on how it is spent. There has been no change to that law, making Warren's demand all the more bold.

Warren directed the district to spend \$830,000 on each of 19 community schools to hire site coordinators and pay for external partnerships and

extended learning time, among other things.

“(That) equals an allocation of an additional \$15.7 million for community schools that shall be included in your 2019-20 budget at the time presented to City Council,” she wrote. She continued: “We also require that the sum of \$250,000 from the city MOE be allocated in your 2019-20 budget to the citywide K-3 accelerated reading program.”

Neither community schools nor early literacy are controversial as priorities for RCSD spending, but the language of “shall be included” and “we also require” is new.

Lowengard responded coolly to the request, noting that the city has not increased the MOE sum for 14 years.

“Since you and I both see the value of community schools ... it would seem to be an ideal time to increase (the MOE),” he wrote in response. “In fact, should you choose to include an additional \$15.7 million, we would spend it all on the community schools.”

In fact, he noted, community schools are one of many budget areas that may face cuts in the 201920 spending plan, and in fact the draft budget released later Tuesday has \$4 million less for contract services related to community schools due to an expired grant.

“At some point, the city needs to contribute even a 1 or 2 percent increase,” Lowengard said Tuesday evening.

board has the sole discretion to approve the district's budget. Mayor Warren's input is welcome, but she is overstepping her authority.”

She continued: “Let's be honest: Warren is inching closer every day to announcing she wants control of our schools.”

While Warren maintains she is not seeking mayoral control, she released a poll earlier this year showing support for the concept. She has also joined forcefully with ROC the Future in urging the state to join with them to reform education in the city.

Her chief of staff, Alex Yudelson, said the demand to Lowengard was “consistent with New York state education law and the city charter,” but did not point to any specific language in either code.

“The Rochester community and the mayor strongly back the implementation of the community schools model, with over 90 percent of respondents in favor of such a model,” he wrote in an email, citing the same poll. “As mayor, it is her duty to do everything in her power to advocate for Rochester's kids. ... (We) look forward to working with the district to ensure these taxpayer dollars are allocated properly.”

Besides the \$16 million that Warren directed to community schools, she wrote to Lowengard: “We will leave distributing the balance of our MOE contribution to your discretion.”

RCSD's draft budget is for \$925 million, nearly flat from 2018-19.

The only lever the city has over RCSD spending is that City Council (not the mayor) must approve the final budget figure in June. It cannot, however, make line-item changes, nor reduce its funding to less than \$119 million.

Mayor Lovely Warren spoke about the need for helping city schools improve. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

LeBron: Warren oversteps authority

The question flared into view most recently in 2018, when school board member Beatriz LeBron encouraged City Council not to pass the RCSD budget over concerns that it was fiscally irresponsible. Council was sympathetic but ultimately concluded that it lacked much authority to intervene.

"We're very much limited in what we can do to impact those kinds of changes," Council President Loretta Scott said last year.

In response to Warren's demand, LeBron wrote: "While I share the mayor's frustration with the district's progress, it's inappropriate for the city to issue such an order. The school