

Warren calls on community to own RCSD's failures

Mayor, nonprofit coalition declare end to status quo for education system in Rochester

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The community nonprofit coalition ROC the Future and Mayor Lovely Warren on Monday declared an end of the status quo for education in the city of Rochester.

■ The first steps are circulating a petition to that effect, and creating a task force to design a strategy for gathering public input to share with state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia, who ultimately will decide on any possible structural changes.

“ROC the Future steps forward as your best partner to actively assure that (all) voices are represented during the months ahead,” they wrote to Elia and the Board of Regents. “(We) assume this role because it is our mission to do so.”

The coalition was responding to distinguished educator Jaime Aquino’s report on the Rochester City School District, and to the district’s response to the report. ROC the Future executive director



Mayor Lovely Warren speaks passionately about the need for community involvement in helping the city schools improve. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Jackie Campbell said the district response was lacking in student and family voices, among other things. The coalition acknowledged it has taken this first step without prominent student and family voices but intends to fix that quickly through its engagement process, Campbell said.

That engagement process ideally will be completed before the district passes its annual budget and hires a new superintendent, and ahead of the June Democratic primary, where as many as five of the seven school board seats could turn over.

‘Today that stops’

In an impassioned speech, Warren said the coalition members were “choosing to do something different (and) to work collectively as a community to bring change on behalf of our children.”

“We’re saying that whatever action (Elia) decides to take, she cannot do it without the community,” Campbell said.

The closest anyone came to offering a possible model Monday was when Warren referenced Tacoma, Washington, as a district that has made gains. Washington state opened its first charter schools in 2016, with Tacoma the most enthusiastic adopter.

Those new charter schools initially generated a wave of optimism in Washington state and national education reform circles. A study released in January, though, showed students at Tacoma charter schools lagged behind the city’s traditional public school students in academic growth.

The ROC the Future initiative is called “Our Children, Our Future.” The petition is available to be signed at roc thefuture.org/ourchildrenourfuture.

“We spend \$1 billion a year in educating our children,” she said. “But our message to them, every day, is, ‘Half of you will fail.’ Today that stops. Today we call on this entire community to work together, because it’s our children. Our future.” JMURPHY7@Gannett.com

Campbell, Warren and others stressed that RCSD is an essential partner in any new paradigm and is not solely to blame for the city’s longtime educational woes. The district was not represented, though, either in the letter to Elia or at the press conference Monday. Neither were any local state legislators, though both Elia and the local Regents have said that serious governance change will likely require legislative action.

“Just the way this whole thing is set up, I don’t see ROC the Future being willing to include the school board, because they went straight to the commissioner without engaging us,” school board member Natalie Sheppard said afterward.

Two minutes after Monday’s press conference began, RCSD’s parent engagement office sent out an announcement for a separate community forum with Elia, Aquino and the Movement for Anti-racist Ministry and Action Coalition, to be held at 1 p.m. March 30 at Central Church of Christ, 101 S. Plymouth Ave.

No specific model floated yet

The coalition was careful to say that it is not requesting any specific governance model, including forms of state or mayoral control, but rather that it intends to represent the community at the table with Elia.

Jackie Campbell, executive director of ROC the Future, says the district response was lacking in student and family voices, among other things.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER
DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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