

Warren urges overhaul of RCSD

Mayor: System is ‘failing at least half of our kids’

STATE OF THE CITY

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Mayor Lovely Warren’s 2019 State of the City speech on Tuesday was as much about the progress and challenges of Rochester, as the failings and future of its public schools.

Her speech, delivered at Enrico Fermi School 17, focused on creating beacons — of hope, of growth, of vitality, of play, of peace.

But while the mayor has been vocal about wanting a governance change in the City School District, and her desire for more beacon and community schools, she again stopped short of suggesting a path to get there.

“We know that our current system is failing at least half of our kids,” Warren said. “And we are allowing it to happen. We are saying that half is good enough. How can we consciously do that?”

“I know why, and you know why,” she continued. “Because we’re talking about other people’s children. ... And let’s be clear, by ‘other people,’ I mean poor parents. Impoverished parents. Those parents who cannot afford to live in more affluent areas of our community. Other people, whose children are not in the urban suburban program, or attend more stable city or charter schools.”

She did not deliver the standard line that, “The state of our city is strong.” Rather, she likened the state of the city to the plight of one of its most challenged neighborhoods — the one surrounding School 17.

The JOSANA neighborhood (Jay Orchard Street Area Neighborhood Association) lies just outside downtown, and in the shadow of the soccer stadium. This is a place marked years ago by the shooting death of 10-year-old Tyshaun Cauldwell, hollowed out by disinvestment and vacancy, slowly rebuilding but still beset by poverty and other obstacles.

School 17 is a beacon, she said, a source of

Mayor Lovely Warren said in her State of the City address that her vision is “to make every school a true beacon of hope, a true community school.” JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

strength to the neighborhood around it.

“I am asking this city to look into the eyes of our children tonight. The eyes of your child, your niece, your nephew, your grandchild — and yes — the eyes of other people’s children, and see the hope in their eyes and pledge to fight for their future.”

City school board members had a previously scheduled budget meeting and did not attend.

Here are three takeaways from the address:

Call for action

Warren reiterated her vision “to make every school a true beacon of hope, a true community school,” but has yet to offer a proposal for how to achieve it.

Past mayors similarly have called for change, but have limited authority in this arena, and were stymied by opposition. What might be different in Warren’s argument is that she also is pointing to part of a solution that many can embrace in community schools, said City Councilman and former school board member Malik Evans.

Such schools, by definition, would be neighborhood-based and integrated with other community services, including libraries and recreation centers.

Warren demanded action, “so that we can seize the solution in front of us, so that every school and every neighborhood can be a beacon of hope.” But that would only be part of a solution, as the mayor signaled in her address.

“Everything should be on the table, because our children’s future is at stake,” the mayor said. “I am calling on this community to support the findings of the distinguished educator, to work with State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia and our state Legislature to introduce a system that allows our children to thrive, a system that provides equality for all.”

Warren talked about the decision to send her daughter Taylor to Northstar Christian Academy rather than city schools, after her then-preschool-aged daughter said an older boy exposed himself to her, and Warren found the district hamstrung in its ability to take action. She recalled counseling a friend to pull her son from the city school’s special ed program and enroll him elsewhere: “I said, ‘Why are you sacrificing your son to a system that you know is failing him?’ ”

Looking on the bright side

The mayor highlighted the city’s low unemployment rate, its job training programs, growth of the downtown Innovation Zone, expansion announcements from area employers and listed off a number of Center City and neighborhood development projects — particularly those providing new or renovated affordable housing.

She also pledged implementation of the full \$500 million in Roc the Riverway improvements along the Genesee River over the next 10 years.

“We’ve shown that when Rochester comes together, we can create jobs and deliver change. In fact, we have had so much change lately, the time has come to create a plan to guide that change,” she said, referring to a long-planned update to the city’s comprehensive plan.

Focus on police and accountability

Warren talked about the city’s falling crime rate: “Murders are down. Shootings are down. Robberies, rapes and other violent crimes are all at, or near, record lows. Property crimes are also at historic lows,” she said.

The administration is working with City Council on a Police Accountability Board, she added, though City Council has been proceeding with a proposal separate from the one Warren offered. Council President Loretta Scott said she expects to put council’s draft legislation (with amendments, none seeking substantially changes) up for debate and a possible vote in May.

Warren also officially proposed locating the Police Department’s Genesee Section office, as expected, in the Bulls Head area of West Main Street. She was elected on the promise to reorganize the Police Department, which she has done, and return to neighborhood section offices. Others are to be built on Lake Avenue and on East Main Street.

The mayor’s choice of School 17 to deliver her 2019 State of the City address was not coincidental.

Warren in 2015 declared it a “Beacon School,” where the Rochester City School District, the city and a slew of community organizations would partner closely.

School 17 has made significant progress in the last several years through an emphasis on restorative practices and student supports; it recently was removed from the state receivership list, though it remains on a separate sanction list.

Still, about 40 percent of students are chronically absent and fewer than 10 percent met proficiency standards on the most recent state tests.

Warren demanded that the district use part of its city funding to support community schools initiatives at School 17 and elsewhere; the district has essentially ignored that demand in its budget process thus far. The mayor is also a prominent voice in the community coalition calling for substantial structural reform in the district, including the possibility of a greater role for her personally.

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“We’ve shown that when Rochester comes together, we can create jobs and deliver change,” Mayor Lovely Warren said during her State of the City address. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE