

State ed leader: RCSD action plan is incoherent, unrealistic

District: Critique part of collaborative effort

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State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia has elaborated on her criticism of the Rochester City School District's action plan, calling for more detail and some unifying vision behind it.

In a statement Thursday, Elia said the plan, developed in response to Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino's report, "fails to include an overarching, coherent vision for district improvement and is unrealistic in terms of timelines and capacity to implement meaningful actions effectively."

District leadership described Elia's critique more as a tweak, substantive but requiring adjustments rather than major changes; all part of a collaborative effort to improve.

Elia's review is the latest in a series of reports, responses and counter-responses based on Aquino's work. She notified the district last month that its response lacked a "coherent vision"; Thursday's communication explained her concerns in more detail.

Among the recurring issues:

■ The district promised to change without describing how it would do so. For instance, it said it would "monitor

for evidence that students have access to grade-level content, materials and resources," but did not say how.

■ It often did not fully include a role for parents in its proposed solutions, including in helping Englishlanguage learners besides Spanish speakers. Elia's response stated: "The district should also address the finding that some parents have felt unwelcome in schools and their belief that this stems from racial bias in the system."

■ Timelines are in some cases unrealistic or disjointed. There were several questions about the rollout of a new K-2 curriculum, for example.

■ Different parts of the plan don't match up. For instance, the district promised that by June it would create a budget review system to ensure spending plans match the strategic plan, but it doesn't currently have a viable strategic plan.

"Nobody said anything at all about a grandiose mission statement," School Board President Van White said of the state's directive until now. And as for a strategic plan: "We have strategic plans. Anybody can put together strategic plans pretty quickly."

The bottom line is progress and achievement, district officials said. To that end, White and others with the district highlighted a new program management software they recently implemented to catalog, assign, and track progress on every action required under the distinguished educator's report and the district's response.

Interim Superintendent Dan Lowengard acknowledged communication has been an issue across state and local leadership. He made passing reference to Mayor Lovely Warren's assertion this week that the district was failing half its students.

That is not so, he said, pointing to the 59 percent graduation rate expected to climb over 60 percent this year. Nobody is satisfied, he said, but “we need partners rather than more people critiquing and having no solution.”

Elia’s response comes against the backdrop of a broader debate over the district’s direction. The ROC the Future coalition and Mayor Lovely Warren have assumed that some additional state intervention is coming and have requested a role within it.

Elia has helped fan that speculation but again on Thursday declined to shed any light on what, exactly, the state Education Department intends to do in Rochester.

“A number of those things are not things that are going to happen overnight and quickly,” she said of potential interventions. “Clearly we’re looking at all options, and a number of those options require support from the Legislature, so we need to know where we are with that and work through the process.”

Includes reporting by staff writer Brian Sharp.

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The Rochester distinguished educator’s report was released and discussed with the media by, from left, State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia, Dr. Jaime Aquino and Board of Regents Chancellor Betty A. Rosa. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE