

School board needs to own problems as well as successes

Rochester School Board President Van White doesn't recall telling me, "There's nothing to see here," that day outside the Rochester City School District office. But I remember it well.

It happened in December 2008, when White was relatively new to the school board and had recently become its vice president. I was a new investigative reporter in town tasked with applying a more critical eye to the *Democrat and Chronicle's* coverage of city schools.

I had arrived on the job eight months earlier with experience reporting on education in New York City, where public schools had undergone momentous change with a mayoral takeover of the system. So, I knew how to navigate the bureaucracy of a big-city school district.

By the time White and I spoke that day, school board commissioners had already tired of me.

My pieces revealing head-shaking lapses of judgment, and policy in areas of textbook distribution, test preparation, labor contracts, fiscal oversight, grade promotion and student suspensions portrayed the district in a negative light.

I bumped into White by happenstance. He was exiting the district office building. I was walking to my car parked nearby. The conversation was cordial. White is nothing if not friendly. A lawyer by profession, he's easy to talk to and likable. His enthusiasm for whatever the subject is at hand is infectious. He asked how I was enjoying Rochester and complimented my work ethic.

White even offered tepid praise for some of my stories. Tepid because, as he explained, the issues the stories had raised were ones the board was already correcting. He cast them as old news to commissioners, who were way ahead of me in recognizing the district's ills.

At one point, he told me I had gotten to Rochester "too late," that I could have exposed gaping holes in the school system being overlooked had I only arrived a few years earlier. But now? "There's nothing to see here," he said. The message was, "We're on it."

Ten years later, Rochester public schools remain the laggard of the entire

state. A special watchdog recently appointed by the state to assess city schools was scathing in his criticism. The miasma of despair has never been worse. People are fed up with failure.



“When you have a district with this many problems, it doesn’t turn around overnight. We have had steady growth,” Rochester School Board President Van White says. WILL CLEVELAND/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO



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New York Education Commissioner Maryellen Elia and Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren have grown increasingly vocal about the potential for some form of new governance for city schools, led by either the state or City Hall, although neither has laid out what that might entail. In light of these developments, I asked White whether he recalled our conversation of 2008. He said he didn't. But he defended the board's record and its members' willingness to get dirty lending a hand rather than "stand on the sidelines." "We are not where we were," White said. "When you have a district with this many problems, it doesn't turn around overnight. We have had steady growth." "I share your frustrations, I share the mayor's frustrations," he added. "But the narrative that's created by the mayor, to paraphrase her, that nothing has changed, by the numbers that's not correct."

He was right that some things have changed for the better since our chat that day.

The four-year graduation rate has climbed to 54 percent from 39 percent. Suspensions have fallen substantially with the implementation of restorative justice programs. Reading and math test scores have inched upward.

Board members can take credit for some of those improvements.

But not enough has changed. The board needs to own that, too, and it hasn't to the extent this community needs to feel confident that hope for something better is on the horizon. In his report, the special watchdog, Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino, said the system needed a complete "reset" and accused the board's seven members of running superintendents out of town by micromanaging the district's day-to-day operations.

There have been six different superintendents, interim and permanent, since 2008.

Aquino offered 84 recommendations, many of them offshoots of the underlying theme that the district lacks a unified sense of direction, holds talented and dedicated educators back, and is

oriented toward adults rather than children. White and some other board members bristled. They rejected the premise that they were overbearing and suggested that they, elected officials, were best suited to carrying out the improvements necessary for the district to thrive. The message was, "We're on it!" It was more, "There's nothing to see here," when, in reality, there's plenty to see — and still more to do.

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Mayor Lovely Warren backs different governance for city schools. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino says the system needs a complete "reset." SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO