

Emails outline state plan to oust RCSD school board

EXCLUSIVE

First detailed manifestation of growing call for intervention

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

A draft plan floated by top leadership of the state Board of Regents to intervene in the Rochester City School District would temporarily remove the elected school board, according to emails obtained by the *Democrat and Chronicle*.

In its place, the Regents would appoint a five-member interim board for at least five school years. The state education commissioner would appoint the superintendent.

The plan, which has the support of Mayor Lovely Warren, is nonetheless far from enactment. To the contrary, Regents Vice Chancellor T. Andrew Brown, who outlined the concept in a May 16 email, said Thursday that state officials are likely to come out with a different directive in the next few days.

“I don’t know if I will be in agreement with it,” Brown said in a phone interview from his Rochester office, referring to what he expects to be announced. His personal preference, he said, is a temporary state takeover.

The proposal, which Brown said reflects a small group discussion among leadership of the regents and State Education Department, is the first detailed manifestation of a growing call for some sort of intervention in the district.

That has included thinly veiled threats from Commissioner MaryEllen Elia and the local Regents, Brown and Wade Norwood, as well as polling commissioned by Warren and



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Mayor Lovely Warren supports a draft plan by state Regents to intervene in the Rochester City School District. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO

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Mayor Lovely Warren

a ROC the Future press conference in March.

Brown sent his May 16 email to Elia; Regent Chancellor Betty Rosa; Norwood; Warren’s chief of

to be a process outlined to transition back to an elected board, a board-appointed superintendent and community engagement, Brown wrote.

staff, Alex Yudelson; Rochester Teacher Association President Adam Urbanski; and others.

Yudelson responded later that day, writing: “Mayor Warren is good with this approach and ready to be supportive however she can.”

In an interview Thursday, Warren cast the proposal as the position of the regents and Elia, though Brown said the regents have not taken a formal position.

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‘Sense of urgency’

Brown, who was Warren’s first corporation counsel when she took office, began his email writing that state Education Department officials and regents faced continued and growing concern about the district. The concept he outline was “based on considerable review and discussion among the commissioner and regents,” he wrote, noting “a sense of urgency to go public with our proposal without delay.”

The *Democrat and Chronicle* obtained his email through a Freedom of Information request filed with the city.

“It’s still a work in progress,” Brown said Thursday. “I would like to have moved on this already. There are other voices that have a say.”

Among those voices is Assemblyman Harry Bronson, D-Rochester, who does not support removal of the board, nor having the commissioner empowered to hire and fire the superintendent.

“I don’t think resetting means we throw democracy out the window and say we are going to remove an elected body in its entirety and allow a state agency to make appointments,” Bronson said. “My sense is we do not have a consensus of the state delegation. ... I’m not a lone wolf in (opposing) this.”

Urbanski said he would prefer some combination of a state monitor and other legislative action from Albany, but not a takeover.

“If you think the school board members are ineffective, replace the board members; if you think they’re overreaching, pass legislation to limit that overreach,”

State Education Department and Board of Regents spokeswoman Emily DeSantis repeated in a statement the position Elia has often stated: “We are having conversations with state and local elected officials, union officials and community leaders to determine the best path forward to improve teaching and learning for all students. No decisions have been made and all options continue to be on the table.”

Norwood did not respond to a request for comment.

Warren said the proposal allows the state to address the problem, on a limited timeframe, free of local politics and agendas: “Let’s not play this game that we can fix the system the way it is currently modeled,” she said.

But Bronson is looking for a less drastic, multipronged approach, and said he is working on legislation and other efforts to provide some system of independent monitoring to ensure progress; a method to incentive more community schools; and a formalized advisory council (a proposal considered by the Regents but abandoned in the plan Brown outlined) to encourage input from and communication with parents.

“Who is Harry Bronson proposing this legislation on behalf of? Not the children of Rochester. Not the parents of Rochester,” the mayor said, arguing those best able to assess the situation had done so, and Bronson could support the recommendation or not. “The question becomes, ‘Who he is answering to?’ ... Or ‘who is he afraid of?’ ” Bronson said he is talking “with many stakeholders” to craft legislation “that will help the people of Rochester, and the children of Rochester, get what they deserve, which is a quality education.” The legislation, he said, aims to address governance along with other needs; from wrap-around services to help for English learners.

“We have gone down this path before,” Bronson said. “And it seems like when we start talking only about governance of the school district there becomes a split, and controversy, then we never end up doing anything.”

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T. Andrew Brown said Thursday that state officials are likely to come out with a different directive in the next few days. PROVIDED PHOTO

New Superintendent Terry Dade was just signed to a three-year contract. PROVIDED PHOTO

he said. "Here, the solution being proposed is to deny a democratic voice to the community."

The timing would be awkward in Rochester. New Superintendent Terry Dade was just signed to a three-year contract, announced last week. And 10 candidates are running for the school board in a June 25 primary election.

More pressing, the state Legislature, which would need to pass a bill detailing any state intervention, adjourns June 19 and will not return until 2020.

Terry Dade a complication

Brown's proposal would involve both the superintendent and board ceding significant authority to the state, compared to the present situation.

Elia would assume the powers and duties of the school board until the Regents appoint the interim board, with members serving at the pleasure of the Regents. The superintendent would report to the commission, though Brown wrote that "consideration will need to be given" to the board's decision to hire Dade.

Additional state dollars and other resources would be required, Brown wrote, adding that the plan would allow the state "strong oversight, both fiscal and operational, over the district until such time as the situation improves."

There also would need

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