

Warren doubles down on support for state takeover of RCSD

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren amplified her call for a state takeover of the City School District on Wednesday, releasing a video urging support of the plan that Regents Vice Chancellor T. Andrew Brown described in an internal email exchange last week. Brown outlined a general proposal where the state would replace the elected school board with an appointed one and possibly oust newly appointed Superintendent Terry Dade before he even takes office July 1. In a subsequent interview, he called that proposal “a work in progress,” and hinted it would soon be superseded by another plan from State Commissioner Maryellen Elia. Warren, though, termed Brown’s light sketch “the commissioner’s plan to fix Rochester city schools” and called on Rochesterians to urge lawmakers to speed it through Albany before the Legislature adjourns for the year June 19. “The state education commissioner and Regents are the experts here, and I believe that they are doing their best to help, but they need us,” she said in the video, as she was surrounded by children at the Thomas Ryan recreation center and Sully Branch Library on Webster Avenue.

“Anything less,” the video script continued, “places politics and the needs of adults over the needs of our children.”

The video, released on the mayor’s public Facebook page late Wednesday, builds on her comments about the email exchange earlier this week but does little to clarify a muddled political situation.

For one thing, Elia has not endorsed the plan that Warren described as hers; instead, a spokeswoman for the state Education Department and Board of Regents earlier this week used now-familiar, noncommittal language: “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.”

The state Education Department did not respond to a request for comment.

Other reactions

Warren’s video shows the phone numbers of local state legislators Harry Bronson, Rich Funke, David Gantt, Joe Robach and Jamie Romeo. Bronson said that he does not support the plan Brown outlined, and that he believes other members of the local legislative delegation agree with him.

Funke’s chief of staff, Matt Nelligan, said the Republican senator is hesitant to support removing the elected board but would support a change that strengthens the power of the superintendent.

“State Ed was supposed to provide us with suggested legislative language we could look at, and we haven’t received that,” he said. “If they’re suggesting these changes, we want to see what they’re suggesting and not just hear about it.” Sen. Michael Ranzenhofer said he does not believe in instituting “a top-down approach,” but that the community needs to come up with its own answers. Gantt, Warren’s closest political ally in the Legislature, said he supports the concept of a state takeover but hadn’t heard about Brown’s proposal because he has been ill and is not in Albany.

“The school board — these people are supposed to be taking care of kids, and they’re acting worse than my granddaughter,” he said. Romeo did not respond to a request for comment; Robach said in a statement he will “continue to listen to the current proposals to improve our Rochester city schools” but did not express an opinion on a takeover. Even with full legislative support, it would be a challenge to expand Brown’s rough outline into a bill and get it through the Assembly and Senate and signed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo in about three weeks.

Cuomo has said he will support any educational reform that the Rochester community develops and supports. It is not clear whether the plan Warren is supporting would count, especially since the coalition ROC the Future two months ago suggested that it was the proper representative of the community. Warren gave an impassioned speech at that ROC the Future announcement and signed a letter calling for “partner and multi-stakeholder community engagement to co-develop a shared vision,” but since then has shown little inclination to coordinate her efforts with the larger body. On Thursday she said her intention at that March press conference was to support Elia’s vision, whatever it is, not to engage in lengthy community dialogue that could delay action.

School Board President Van White said community leaders should be focusing on supporting students taking Regents exams or approaching graduation this June, not board governance.

“A plan to replace seven adults with seven unknown adults is not a plan to fix special education, or this influx of students from Puerto Rico, or (the district’s other problems),” White said.

In the meantime, the Rochester school board has passed a budget (which goes to City Council for ultimate approval) and hired a superintendent. Its next important date is June 6, when its revised response to Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino’s report is due.

JMURPHY7@Gannett.com



Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren has amplified her call for a state takeover of the City School District.
 JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

“The state education commissioner and Regents are the experts here, and I believe that they are doing their best to help, but they need us.

Anything less places politics and the needs of adults over the needs of our children.”

Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren