

RCSD board member Davis says superintendent search 'disrespectful'

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One day before the four finalists for the Rochester City School District superintendent job come to town for public introductions, board member Judith Davis held a press conference Friday criticizing the search process as “fundamentally flawed and disrespectful,” and the board that conducted it as out of touch with constituents.

It was part press conference and part campaign event, by turns apologetic and accusatory. Davis, who was elected in November to fill out a partial term and is running for a full term in the June primary, said she had fallen into a “stupor of busyness” in her four months on the board.

“I forgot to keep in mind always that there is a longstanding power relationship between the board and community, with the board acting historically to shut the community out ... or to ensure it is uninformed, confused and as far away from the decision-making process as possible,” she said.

As it relates to the search, Davis said the board used a search process that didn't adequately incorporate student and parent input. Sessions designed for that purpose were poorly attended and the events this weekend will have no time for direct questioning by community members. She said the board should jettison the four current candidates and return to the beginning of its search. She also proposed allowing the community to directly put forth a “community candidate,” and questioned why former RCSD interim Superintendent Bill Cala wasn't chosen as a finalist.

She criticized the board's use of executive session in its meetings, saying the standards for what is confidential are unclear to her. And, sitting alongside running-mates Andria Bryant, Howard Eagle and Clifford Florence, she said the board “needs a reset” in the June primary.

“Instead of the state or city taking over the schools, or a single coalition declaring itself the best to lead, I would like to see the community get an opportunity it's never been given before ... to become that stabilizing force from the outside in,” she said.

The press conference will do little to calm the sense that the board is increasingly fractured and unable to work together in a single direction. Davis' comments echoed in part those of departing board member Liz Hallmark, who concluded the board “has been letting down this district.”

Davis said she did not inform her fellow board members of her criticism in advance of the press conference. Board President Van White, who is running for City Court judge, could not be reached for immediate comment.

While Davis criticized the superintendent search process, she declined to share her thoughts about any of the four men whom it yielded.

The four finalists will appear this weekend at a pair of district-hosted events, speaking separately to staff and the public: Sito Narcisse and Eric Thomas starting at 12:30 p.m. Saturday and Terry Dade and Devon Horton starting at 12:30 p.m. Sunday. Both will be at the Freddie Thomas Learning Center, 625 Scio St.

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From left are Howard Eagle, Andria Bryant, RCSD board member Judith Davis and Clifford Florence.
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