

Struggle over RCSD heats up: Bronson says Warren's plan 'abdicates responsibility to lead'

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With one week remaining in the legislative session, Assemblyman Harry Bronson has drafted an "empowerment act" he says will lay the foundation for reform of the City School District.

He also took aim at Mayor Lovely Warren's proposed nonbinding referendum on a state takeover of the district saying it "abdicates our responsibility to lead."

The bill has yet to be introduced, but provides the language and details on which Bronson hopes to build consensus in the coming days. The timeline is short, as he likely needs to introduce the bill no later than Monday for it to be voted on this session.

While opposed to the referendum, Bronson said the two measures could move forward together, with his proposed legislative changes integrated into a state takeover of the district, should that come to pass.

"I'm trying to do something," Bronson said. "It's hard, because there are significant disagreements."

Bronson's push adds to a growing call for intervention in the struggling district, and increasing tensions with City Hall. Warren has called his proposal "a Band-Aid," and said she does not support it. On Thursday she said the bill was "no solution at all" and undercut the assemblyman's standing, saying he represents "less than 20% of our city's students, and he's trying to take away the ability of all city parents to decide the future of their children's education." Her proposed referendum, which City Council could vote to authorize on Tuesday, wouldn't be on the ballot until November, and wouldn't trigger a takeover but could set the stage for state action next year.

County Executive Cheryl Dinolfo also jumped into the fray on Thursday, saying Warren has her full support, and that "real, meaningful education reform" is needed, "not more watereddown solutions from the same politicians who have been part of the problem." The county executive's endorsement was unsolicited, aides said — even more remarkable as the county historically has stayed clear of the schools debate.

of state-appointed Distinguished Educator Jamie Aquino — calls for additional state funding but does not specify how much. It would:

- Require the superintendent, working with the state, to convert all schools identified as "comprehensive support and improvement schools" to community schools.
- Mandate that school board members get 12 hours of yearly job training, with topics including ethics, cultural sensitivity, dispute resolution and governance.
- Limit board involvement in day-to-day operations, focused on policies to improve student outcomes. The legislation itself does not constrain the board beyond what exists in state law, but a spokesman for Bronson said a back-to-basics approach would in itself rein in the board.
- Create a Strategic Academic Improvement Plan within 60 days, with benchmarks and measurable objectives to address improvement in areas such as the education of English language learners and students with disabilities.



Assemblyman Harry Bronson PROVIDED PHOTO

What's in Bronson's bill

“As elected leaders, we have a responsibility to fight for our children’s future until the clock hits zero on this year’s legislative session,” said Bronson, D-Rochester.

His legislation — which aims to further the recommendations

The plan would encompass aspects of an overall strategic plan and individual school improvement plans, while tackling topics ranging from curriculum to parental education, and finance to workplace issues.

■ Establish a sevenmember advisory council to assist the superintendent, drawing on community groups and experts in child development, mental health, trauma informed learning, English language learners, students with disabilities, and culturally responsive teaching. No member should be an elected official or officeholder in any political party.

“Turning the important discussion on how best to improve student outcomes into a political campaign with only the potential of legislation many months thereafter abdicates our responsibility to lead,” Bronson said in a statement releasing the bill language, “and maintains the status quo by placing improvement of our school district out of reach (until) after January 2020 at the earliest.”

Referendum, legislation, or both?

The mayor is seeking a temporary takeover, replacing the elected school board with an interim, five-member appointed board for five years. Bronson countered that what’s needed isn’t “Albany bureaucrats telling us how to fix our schools,” but a comprehensive plan that goes beyond who sits on the school board. Still, he said: “I don’t think it has to be an either- or,” pointing specifically to the clarified roles of the board and superintendent, and the proposed mediator, as measures that also would be of benefit “with the appointed Albany insiders.”

Warren had a different take: “By trying to stop our citizens from voting on putting our children first, Assemblyman Bronson

is singlehandedly allowing Albany special interests to control what happens in Rochester.”

Assemblyman David Gantt, D-Rochester, dean of the Rochester delegation and a close political ally of Warren’s, also isn’t sold on Bronson’s pitch for doing both. He sees the legislation as undercutting the push for state intervention.

“I think we have to go ahead and make the full step, do what the mayor says, do something completely different than what we have been doing,” Gantt said.

He is working on his own legislation that in the least would mirror or reinforce the mayor’s call for a referendum, he said, and possibly set the stage for state intervention, if that vote is successful.

“The time is now to make the change,” Gantt said.

Similar sentiment comes from Robert Duffy, president and CEO of the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce, who made an unsuccessful push for control of city school when he was mayor more than a decade ago.

He supports the referendum and says that, while Bronson’s proposal has merit, it might be better timed at a later date, possibly in concert with state action.

“I would not confuse the issue,” Duffy said. “The time for studies and incremental change really has passed. ... Changes have to be much more revolutionary than evolutionary to be successful.”

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