

## Mayor seeks referendum on temporary state takeover of city schools

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Mayor Lovely Warren wants voters to decide whether a temporary state takeover of the City School District is needed, announcing Friday that she is seeking a November referendum on the matter.

The referendum would

not trigger a takeover, but rather seek to show support for the move, while amending the City Charter to set the stage for state action.

City Council could vote to authorize the referendum later this month.

“The people of our city need to be able to decide what is best for our children,” Warren said, confident that “the voters of our city want this.”

If the measure passes on Nov. 5, it still would take state legislation to replace the elected board — meaning any action is likely a year off.

There is limited support for a state takeover among the local delegation to Albany, however. But early on, some state and city leaders have begun splitting the question — supporting a referendum, but not advocating a position. Assemblyman Harry Bronson, D-Rochester, has emerged as a foil to Warren, arguing for reform within the current governance structure.

Bronson is finalizing legislation to present in the next week that offers a more limited plan tailored to the recommendations of the distinguished educator.

A poll conducted several months ago by the *Democrat and Chronicle*

and Siena Research Institute showed that 50% of city residents favor replacing the elected school board with some alternate model, compared with 43% opposed and the remainder uncertain.

Voters head to the polls on June 25, meanwhile, to decide which of the 10 Democratic school board candidates should be on the November ballot.

Four seats are up for election in the fall.

### Competing plans for reform

Warren is seeking support for a plan floated last month by Regents Vice Chancellor T. Andrew Brown to replace the elected school board with a state-appointed, five-member interim board for at least five school years. The draft referendum is silent on the superintendent.

ROC the Future director Jackie Campbell did not immediately return a message seeking comment.

Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski said he thinks Bronson’s plan “makes a lot more sense” and is more likely to lead to improvements. “I know the mayor is sincere and passionate about students,” he said. “But the cure she’s proposing is worse than the disease. She’s proposing we disenfranchise the citizenry of Rochester. ... There’s no evidence of a state takeover anywhere in the state or country resulting in any measurable improvements.”

Others cast the mayor’s chosen course as an oversimplification of a complex problem. In a statement, the grassroots Metro Justice organization argued that voters are being asked to support a plan that lacks detail on what an interim board would do differently.

“A state takeover does not address machine-like politics on the school board, it does not address systemic poverty, and it does not address the effects of mass incarceration or housing discrimination,” the group said in a prepared statement. “Without addressing systemic issues, one cannot hope to effect systemic change.”

### Going forward

Nonetheless, separating support for the referendum — the “let the people decide” argument — from support for a takeover is likely to win Warren enough votes

That is another complication, because newly hired Superintendent Terry Dade was just recently signed to a three-year contract. Bronson has been re-fining his plan since last month. His proposal would:

■ Mandate annual professional development for the school board around effective governance and require the use of a professional arbiter to settle disputes.

■ Incentivize converting all low-performing city schools into community schools, which Bronson defined as having extended-day and summer programs, embedded social services and partnerships with the city, county and nonprofits. The schools also could require professional development and conflict resolution training for staff.

■ Create a “children’s advisory council” made up of experts in the areas that Aquino identified, including mental health, special education and English language learners to advise the superintendent on carrying out fixes the district and board have put forward.

The additional state funding that would require, Bronson said, may or may not be outlined in his eventual bill. Bronson also wasn’t sure whether it would include a waiver from the state law that only allows reimbursement for bus rides more than 1.5 miles, a major obstacle to successful community schools.

“As everyone has recognized, with the people on the board and it being dysfunctional, we’re trying to address that by putting other mechanisms in place to be supportive,” Bronson said. “What I have learned through this process is that boards that are successful get training and rely on the resources available to them.”

Bronson discussed the plan with Warren earlier this week, he said, and found that “she wasn’t really interested in talking about (it).”

“As I explained to him, I think the system is broken and what he wants to do is put a Band-Aid on a system that’s hemorrhaging,” Warren said, explaining that they agreed to disagree and that she would not support his legislation.

### Who’s on board?

The mayor won immediately praise from Robert Duffy, president and CEO of the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce.

among City Council members to put the matter on the ballot. There remains some uncertainty there, as members said they only were told of the measure Friday morning. “I need some more time to understand what the implications are,” said council member Elaine Spaul. “There are just too many unknowns.”

Voters should not conflate talk of a referendum to mean they needn’t worry about casting their ballot in the school board races, Patterson said. He is seeking re-election to his northeast district seat, and while he stood with the mayor in support of the referendum Friday, he has not staked out a position on a temporary takeover. Until something changes, he said, there is an elected board, and those board members oversee the district and the \$931 million budget that Scott said City Council is likely to sign off on later this month Warren decided to move ahead with the referendum after speaking with state officials in Albany on Monday. It became apparent “that people were not going to move,” she said — claiming that “special interests” (whom she did not identify) were pressuring State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia to maintain the status quo.

The proposed changes to the City Charter, contingent on state action, provide the vehicle for getting what otherwise is an opinion poll on the ballot. Those changes would eliminate inconsistencies that might arise in the charter should the state act. Brown indicated last month that the state appeared poised to propose something less than the temporary takeover, a plan he said education leaders including Elia had discussed, and the action he supported. Elia never came out publicly to endorse the plan, nor has the full Board of Regents.

The resignation of state-appointed Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino, effective Friday, appears to have further frustrated the mayor. Aquino was brought in by the state last summer to conduct an intensive review of RCSD and help the district address its myriad challenges and low-performing schools. He submitted a scathing report last November, and has remained critical of the district’s response.

In a brief announcement of Aquino’s depar-

**Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren announcing plans for a citywide referendum on a proposed state takeover of the RCSD.** BRIAN SHARP/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

“One word of caution is that there will be a spirited campaign against this referendum by those who currently benefit from the status quo,” said Duffy, who, as mayor in 2010, pushed for mayoral control of the school district.

Also backing the referendum was Sen. Rich Funke, R-Perinton, though he has said through a spokesman that he is reluctant to remove an elected board.

Warren announced the proposed referendum Friday at City Hall, standing with Council President Loretta Scott and council members Willie Lightfoot and Michael Patterson. Warren and Scott submitted the enabling legislation together.

Not on the podium, and not invited, were members of the ROC the Future Coalition who Warren joined back in March to push for school reform. A spokesman said it was because this was about the work of elected officials. Warren elaborated.

“This is not about them. You have too many special interests, too many special interest voices around that table who continue to want to put the needs of adults over children,” Warren said. Asked if the coalition remained a legitimate vehicle for reform, she said: “They do good work. But when it comes down to an issue like this, it’s split with what people believe it is the right path forward.”

ture last week, Elia said that while his “contributions have been significant, we know our work is far from done in Rochester.”

Aquino said he only planned to stay on the job for a year, and the state has not indicated whether it will appoint a successor.

Elia has also not provided state lawmakers with any draft legislation for reform of city schools, as she indicated last month she would do, local officials said.

Bronson, meanwhile, said he has spoken with other members of the local legislative delegation about his proposal but wasn’t sure whether he had their ultimate support.

The window for state legislative action is quickly closing, with the Legislature expected to adjourn in another two weeks and not return until 2020. Asked

said he didn’t know.

In the meantime, RCSD on Thursday submitted its revised response to Aquino’s report, incorporating Elia’s criticism of its first draft.

Board President Van White wrote in that submission: “We are convinced that, if properly resourced and given an adequate amount of time, the attached plan will result in similar gains in other key performance areas and ensure that the district’s students receive the quality education they need and deserve.”

Speaking at a media availability Friday afternoon, White reacted to the Warren announcement.

“We’re in agreement with the mayor and others that things need to move faster. ... But the reality is that these are problems are generations in the making.”

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whether he thought his idea could be passed into law  
before the legislative year ends June 19, Bronson