

Elia says RCSD needs oversight

Commissioner defends department's actions

Justin Murphy

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Outgoing New York State Education Commissioner Maryellen Elia on Friday defended her department's low profile during the frantic debate over a state takeover of the Rochester City School District earlier this summer, and said the district still should have state oversight.

In the last week of the state legislative session, Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren publicly called on residents to support "the commissioner's plan to fix Rochester city schools," even though Elia never formally endorsed the takeover plan that Regent T. Andrew Brown sketched in an email exchange. Asked on Friday what exactly she and the department had been doing during that time, Elia said: "Working to support the children of Rochester."

"I don't think it's a fair criticism to say we did nothing," Elia added. "Whether you have a specific legislative plan, or you have a plan that you can't get any traction on — I think those are two very different things."

New York state has only ever effected a takeover in one school district — Roosevelt, on Long Island, from 2002 to 2013. Elia said that district "is much better today than when it was taken over."

Alan Singer, an education professor at Hofstra University who has followed the Roosevelt situation closely, said the progress there was "largely on paper." He pointed out that the school board suspended its superintendent earlier this year without explanation.

"My impression is that what the state did is declare victory and leave," Singer said.

"Roosevelt is still troubled," he said.

Elia is leaving her position at the end of August to take another, as yet- undisclosed job. In what was likely her last official

visit to Rochester, she spent six hours with new schools Superintendent Terry Dade and his leadership team reviewing the distinguished educator's report and the district's resultant action plan.

Elia said she believes Rochester still needs some sort of state oversight mechanism but did not specify whether it will receive a new distinguished educator following the departure of Jaime Aquino.

"As a commissioner who's been working very closely with Rochester for my entire tenure of four years, I believe that's an important thing," she said. "For too long we haven't concentrated on children in Rochester. I believe the focus is shifting ... but I believe the best way to share (that) with the community ... is with a neutral set of eyes to say, 'Yes, they're moving the right direction.'" She expressed confidence in Dade but also jabbed at the school board, saying it historically has failed to ensure that "things go in the direction they need to go in."

"I had a very positive meeting today with the superintendent," she said. "But as you know, the superintendent is not the only one who is a leader in the school district."

JMURPHY7@Gannett.com



Elia

