

LEFT IN LIMBO:**Charter****236 STUDENTS CUT ADRIFT BY SCHOOL CLOSURE Time ran out for bold education experiment at troubled charter school**

EXCLUSIVE D&C INVESTIGATION

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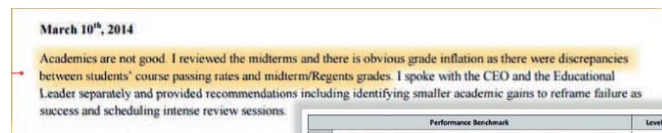
The very name of the school — Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School — was the first selling point for Neysha Rodriguez. She was coming from middle school in the city school district and wanted a high school program that would propel her toward a good-paying job. After hearing a sales pitch from school founder Dennis Francione at a recruitment event, she thought she'd found it.

“Everybody was like: ‘This is the best school! We get laptops, it’s a small setting,’” she said. “He made it all rose petals.”

It wasn’t long into the school’s first year, 2012, that Rodriguez’s perception changed. The promised take-home laptops never came. Teachers quit abruptly and often, and dozens of students followed them out. Fighting and drugs were prevalent.

Worst of all, the A’s and B’s Rodriguez got for her classwork didn’t translate into passing grades on Regents exams. Discouraged and confused, she quit attending school for good at the end of her 12th-grade year without enough credits to gradu-

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**Resignation**

An excerpt from the resignation letter submitted in 2014 by Jeannine Dingus-Eason, former board president of the Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School (RCMCS).

...including identifying smarter academic gains to restore future as

Performance Benchmark	Level
Benchmark 1: Student Performance: The school has met or exceeded achievement indicators for academic trends toward proficiency, proficiency and high school graduation. At all grade levels and all assessments, scoring proficiently means achieving a performance level of 3 or higher (high school Regents and Common Core Regents exam score of 65 or higher).	Falls Far Below
Benchmark 2: Teaching and Learning: School leaders have systems in place designed to cultivate shared accountability and high expectations and that lead to students' well-being, improved academic outcomes, and educational success. The school has rigorous and coherent curriculum and assessments that are aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) for all students. Teachers engage in strategic practices and decision-making in order to	Falls Far Below



Recommendation

The New York state Education Department's recommendation to the Board of Regents that RCMCS' charter not be renewed.

Recommendation

VOTED: That the Board of Regents denies the renewal application for the Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School, that the board of trustees of the Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School be provided notice of this action and that its charter will terminate upon the expiration of its current charter term on June 30, 2017, and that the board of trustees of the Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School is directed to take all steps necessary to close the School in accordance with its charter and the School closure procedures of the Department and cease instruction as of June 30, 2017; including but not limited to the immediate provision of notice of

Non-renewal finding

Another section from the non-renewal document for RCMCS, containing the regents' acceptance of the recommendation.



The hallways at Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School are lined with inspirational sayings. Earlier this month, the state Board of Regents ordered the school to close June 30.

JAMIE GERMANO@JGERMANO1/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

LEFT IN LIMBO:

Charter

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ate.

She still doesn't know how close she is to graduation, but she's sure Francione and his school are to blame.

"At first it sounded so amazing," she said. "But I regret going to that school 100 percent."

Career Mentoring, located on three floors of rented space off St. Paul Street, was ordered closed by the state Board of Regents earlier this month, the consequence of not having met the goals it laid out in its charter. It is the first charter school to close in Rochester since 2005.

Interviews with more than a dozen current and former school community members — students, parents, teachers and board members — reveal a school that was dangerous and dysfunctional from the beginning of its five-year existence. A number of people associated with the school described Francione, a former city school principal, as volatile and vindictive, and the board of trustees as unwilling or unable to oversee him effectively.

» The school had teacher turnover rates above 60 percent each of its first three summers and has had seven "educational leaders," or principals, in its five years.

» The New York state Education Department is investigating "irregularities" in the school's reported 75 percent August graduation rate; six current and former staff members said classroom grades, state test scores and attendance figures were routinely falsified.

» Current and former employees accuse school founder and CEO Dennis Francione of abusive, manipulative and erratic behavior.

In an interview a week after the state decision was announced, Francione and Chief of Operations and Academics Kathleen Denaro pushed back strongly against accusations of data falsification, either for grades or attendance.

More generally, Francione defended the school and his stewardship of it. The Board of Regents, he said, had failed to understand the school's

programmatic mission, or to appreciate the gains it made in the last two years.

“Every charter school person will tell you that (the first three years) are the storming years,” he said. “But we are seeing progression now. ... I don’t see that it wasn’t working.”

Even as it closes, the school still has its supporters.

Several current students said they’d found a home on Hart Street after bouncing among several other schools earlier in their lives.

Twelfth-grader Michael Rivera has been at the school for two years. He intends to go to Alfred State to study culinary arts, and has an internship now with Palmer Food Services to help him prepare.

“I was going straight downhill and they picked me right back up,” he said. “I don’t want there to be another child who needs that help and doesn’t get it. ... I know they can’t get (what this school offers) nowhere else.”

At the most recent visit in September 2016, though, a state observer concluded: “Both observed and planned lessons show minimal promotion of higher-order thinking or high levels of academic achievement.”

In any case, the school will close its doors in June, after which its 236 current students will need to find a new high school. For students and educators who arrived there with hope and left disenchanted, the news came none too soon.

“We tried to keep faith in the school, because when it’s your school you want to see it succeed,” one former student, Nasir Baiyina, said. “But they didn’t live up to anything they said. I feel I was robbed of a high school experience.”

Teachers, administrators ‘dropping like flies’

From its founding in 2012, Career Mentoring, or RCMCS, struggled with retaining teachers and administrators. In interviews and written complaints obtained by the *Democrat and Chronicle*, current and departed staff members repeatedly characterized the school as a punishing work environment, with Francione pitting people against one another or firing them without notice.

Tracy Larkins-Hobbs worked as an executive secretary in the school’s first year. She called it “a horror scene.”

“The teachers were quitting, dropping like flies,” she said. “They were crying, losing weight — you name it.”

Teachers and other staff left in droves, sometimes during the middle of the school day, and reported that Francione screamed and cursed at them and threw things in meetings. Several students said they’d gone through seven English teachers their first year.

“It was just such atrocious mishandling — when a teacher was struggling, it was treated punitively instead of getting mentorship and working

with them,” said Kristin Rapp, a former teacher. “There were teachers crying almost every day. There were teachers who would leave in the middle of teaching a class.”

Francione pointed to the better pay and benefits in traditional public schools, but mostly attributed the turnover to teachers’ unwillingness or inability to buy into the school’s non-traditional, project-based approach.

“Some teachers who applied early on came with great résumés ... but once they got into the classroom, they struggled,” Francione said. “(That) is where people became bitter with me, and upset. Every time certain staff members reverted back to traditional teaching, I got very upset with them.”

The school’s “educational leaders,” roughly akin to a principal, fared little better. It wasn’t until the fifth year that one returned for the beginning of the next school year.

One, Dan McFarlane, assumed the role less than 12 months after receiving his initial certification as a classroom teacher. Those who left have all taken lesser positions, including as classroom teacher, at their new schools.

As the staff turnover worsened over the following three school years, students could not help but notice. A group of them presented administrators with a list of 20 requests in 2015, with “new CEO” the first item listed.

“We were just frustrated at that point,” one of the students, Rachel McDuffie, said. “We were making these relationships with teachers and staff members, and a lot of kids don’t have that (adult) support at home. So you see that you can rely on your teachers and have positive relationships, and then they’re gone. They vanish. Just because they had a disagreement with Mr. Francione.”

The turnover rate dropped considerably, to 26 percent, going into the current school year. Several current staff members and students spoke glowingly of the school in its current form.

“We love these kids, and I know these kids love us,” internship coordinator Keith Krupcznski said. “The progress this school has made over the last two or three years is amazing. ... (Closing the school) is a complete injustice.”

Observers from the state education department saw it differently. In visits both this school year and the last one, they judged the school “far below” expectations on student performance and instruction.

Systematic grade inflation alleged

Francione has trumpeted the school’s 75 percent graduation rate in August 2016, its first 12th-grade cohort. But there is more to that number than meets the eye.

First, more than a third of the 83 ninth-graders who first enrolled in 2012 were gone from the school by 2016. And of the 41 who got a diploma

by August 2016, 14 received a local degree rather than a Regents degree.

Only five schools in the state had a higher percentage of their students receive a local, not Regents, diploma. Local diplomas are normally reserved for students with disabilities, of whom RCMCS enrolls a significantly lower proportion than the city school district.

That statistic was a red flag for the state Education Department. In its recommendation of non-renewal, it noted that eight students had received a medical designation known as a 504 plan in the months before graduation, thereby making them eligible for a local diploma when they otherwise would not have been. Furthermore, two students were awarded advanced Regents diplomas when they had not earned them.

Denaro, the chief of operations and academics, said the children and their families had initiated most of those 504 plan proceedings, giving the school no choice but to honor them. The school said it had no explanation for why so many families independently made that choice in the months before graduation.

Putting the local diploma issue aside, six current and former school employees said school leaders had regularly inflated or falsified classroom grades and state test scores as well as attendance.

Four of them spoke under condition of anonymity, saying they feared retribution for speaking out. But Jeannine Dingus- Eason, the former board president, warned the school board in 2014 of “obvious grade inflation,” with students getting A’s in their classes but failing state tests. She connected it to the inexperienced teachers, who were unable to control their classrooms.

“The grade inflation was glaring and the teaching was awful,” she said this month. “It was supposed to be a teacherled school, but it couldn’t have been with the people he hired.”

Larkins-Hobbs, the former executive secretary, said: “They were changing the grades. ... It was all on Dennis. I sat in those meetings and heard him tell them: ‘You do whatever you have to do to make sure they have passing grades.’” “Several students in the class of 2016 said they perceived that school leaders were being dishonest with academic reporting.

“Graduation was kind of shady,” Rachel McDuffie said. “Everybody came in with these medical statements and stuff so they could get a (local diploma). ... We just joked about it. We knew the school was going to get shut down.”

Francione and Denaro strongly denied any wrongdoing. Denaro called the allegations “absurd.”

“I wouldn’t tolerate that,” Francione said. “There’s an ethics committee (on the board of trustees) — why didn’t these people report it to the ethics committee?”

The board of trustees, though, was part of the problem. In site visit reports over several years, the state repeatedly criticized it for failing to provide adequate oversight of the school or Francione.

“Dennis wields an inordinate amount of power over the staff, and it’s the job of the board to check him,” said Dingus-Eason, the founding board president. “They never did.”

Francione faces a sexual discrimination lawsuit from a former administrator, Jennifer Bulling. In it, Bulling alleges that she did report her concerns to the board, to no effect.

Several weeks later, according to the lawsuit: “Francione poked (Bulling) in the forehead with his finger while stating, ‘Why would you think it was a good idea to go to the board?’ “ Francione has declined to comment on Bulling’s lawsuit in general.

The current board president is Kevin McCormick, whose relationship with Francione dates back more than a decade. When asked to comment on whether he provided effective independent oversight of the school and Francione, he deferred to an attorney representing the school at a meeting with Francione.

“I can’t speak for Kevin personally,” the attorney, Jennifer Schwartzott, said. “The board generally disagrees with (the state’s) characterization.”

Rapp, a former teacher, also contacted the board with concerns. In a letter after she was let go in 2015, she wrote: “I have seen some of the most unprofessional, dishonest and unethical behavior that I have ever witnessed in my career here.”

Rapp said she never received any response to that letter. “We felt like we were punished for standing up to say something was wrong or unethical,” she said. “If you decide to be a whistleblower and you’re punished for it, that seems like a major problem.”

Starting to turn a corner?

A recurring theme among the school’s remaining supporters is a belief that it has turned a corner from its difficult early years.

“It started off maybe a little hectic, but it’s progressed so much,” 11th-grader Kedari Rutledge said. “(The state) is all about numbers, but they’re not here every day. It runs so much deeper than they see.”

Brenda Beason’s grandson will graduate this spring in the school’s final senior class and plans to attend Finger Lakes Community College. Beason, who sits on the board of trustees as the parent representative, said she’s impressed with how school staff keep in touch with students even after they graduate.

“When they say you need a village to raise a child — that’s what this school is,” she said. “We sometimes just see the grades, and everyone wants the grades to be great, but there’s more to it. This is home for these children.”

Schwartzott, the school attorney, said RCMCS is considering its legal options to appeal the closure. In particular, school leaders felt misled after receiving an encouraging email from the state in December, then a notice of likely closure in January.

For the moment, though, the school is working with RCSD and the state education department to make sure its students can find new schools for next year and have their records transferred properly.

A week after the Board of Regents decision, Francione was philosophical about the closure but unapologetic about his work at the school.

“I’ll be very honest with you, I think I’m light years ahead of everyone right now,” he said. “I feel very passionate and proud of this program.”

There again, his perspective differed sharply from state overseers as well as a parade of disenchanted former school community members.

Dingus-Eason is director of the executive leadership doctoral program at St. John Fisher College. She said she drafted much of the school’s initial charter school application herself and was passionate about the model. She had harsh criticism for the way Francione led the school, but was ultimately remorseful for the missed opportunity.

“The promise of the school was so great,” she said. “I feel bad for the families that were let down. I feel like we failed so many kids.”

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Jaquan Gordon is a senior at the Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School.

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Ryan James Turner teaches English class at the Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School.

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Dennis Francione is the CEO at the Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School.