

CITY SCHOOLS

Change

Something. Must. Change. The search for solutions to a failed school system starts now

Julie Philipp Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The idea started in a manner reminiscent of the way newspapers were once read. Over coffee and eggs at Jim's on Main. That's the diner where Carlos Carballada and I sometimes meet for breakfast. Carlos is a former chancellor of the New York State Board of Regents. He has held other impressive titles in various sectors of government and private industry, but he usually just wants to talk about education.

One morning, we were trying to work out the exact moment when the Rochester City School District stopped doing what it is supposed to do. Since then, how many children have we continued to send to these schools, knowing they would likely fail?

We will never be able to calculate the precise number. But there is no question it is staggering. Sickening. Infuriating. Unconscionable. Unbelievably costly for us all.

Despite decades of failure, however, our community still does not have a plan. There is no unified vision for fixing this. There is no reform movement.

No one is leading the way out.

Something. Must. Change.

It is no small occurrence that the germ of an idea formulated at Jim's coincided with a request for proposals from Gannett, the owner of the USA TODAY Network, of which we are a part. Coffee and eggs are increasingly absent as more of us get our news all day long, on the fly, using small devices that divide our attention in innumerable ways. Gannett was seeking to fund bold ideas that will put outstanding and impactful journalism in front of this growing mobile audience and keep them wanting more.

Time to Educate, a project developed by our incredible team of editors, journalists, image makers, producers, technical wizards and support staff, is our answer to that challenge.

This week, the *Democrat and Chronicle* is launching what we hope will become one of our most important reporting, engagement and advocacy efforts ever.

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Christopher Jesus Hart-Gill walks every day to Kodak Park School 41, where he is in preschool. OLIVIA LOPEZ/@OLOPEZ4/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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But it is not ours alone. Parents, students and other community members are going to be essential partners, guiding the project in critical and unprecedented ways. We are going to be change-makers together.

Giving up is not an option

Over the past two decades, the *Democrat and Chronicle* has published hundreds of reports, special series and videos about our education system and how it is connected to racism and poverty. At the same time, our Editorial Board and opinion staff have made city schools a top priority every year. We have issued countless calls to action, including urging the firing of top school and union officials.

Our Unite Rochester initiative pulled a diverse group of community leaders together to push hard for education reforms.

However, the *Democrat and Chronicle* has been just as ineffective as the rest of our community in making a significant difference in the lives of these children. Now, Executive Editor and Vice President of News Karen Magnuson is directing us to push even harder.

A clear and singular focus

Our newsroom and Editorial Board rarely work closely together on major projects, for good reason. To maintain their integrity, those who report and edit the news must remain as unbiased as humanly possible. The board, on the other hand, exists to develop the *D&C*'s institutional voice — and opinions are essential. Because of these different functions, there is an invisible wall between the two sides.

The wall remains in place for Time to Educate, but the two sides are pressed shoulder to shoulder against it. We are aligning our reporting, engagement and advocacy efforts to move more forcefully toward the same target: find solutions to end educational inequity in our community and help implement them.

A community-driven approach

Time to Educate begins with great questions. You will help us decide what those questions should be. We especially want to hear from parents and students, and we will make sure your voices are as prominent as those belonging to the many other stakeholders in our education system. We are using groundbreaking new digital tools, as well as embedding ourselves in the neighborhoods where you live.

The answers come next. Justin Murphy, Rochester's most experienced and award-winning education reporter, is leading the hunt. Erica Bryant is also stepping away from her column for several months to help with this enormous undertaking. Both are receiving special training and have joined a network of education reporters who are identifying solutions across the country. Our Editorial Board, along with two Time to Educate fellows, will be conducting research, too. We will show you what we find, in ways that make the information easy to digest.

As we identify potential solutions, we will begin to make informed choices. Which solutions make the most sense here? What do we need to do to make them happen? How can we get from here to there? We will work with our community to make a plan.

Finally, we will act. Our Editorial Board, engagement staff and a growing number of partners will advocate, organize and do. We will offer opportunities to get involved.

Something will change

We don't know the total number of students we have pushed in and out of woefully inadequate schools over the years. It is safe to assume, however, that most of them are still with us.

After all, when a school district spews out about 3,000 dropouts every five years, where else can these uneducated young people go? When a high school diploma does not prepare our young men and women for college or a career, what can they do for the rest of their lives?

In a world where rapid change is the norm, a growing part of our community is stuck in place. And — in many ways — so are the rest of us.

Let's stop saying "nothing ever changes," and believe that something will.

Senior Engagement Editor Julie Philipp is co-leading Time to Educate with Matthew Leonard, who is editor of the Democrat and Chronicle's investigative reporting team.



Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams is one of seven who have been at the helm of the Rochester district over the past 16 years. MAX SCHULTE/ @MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
