

Small victories in city school district

When Bolgen Vargas took control of the Rochester School District, it was buying health insurance for hundreds of ineligible people, including dozens who were dead. It is no longer doing that.

You have to celebrate small victories at 131 W. Broad St.

No one expects urban superintendents to preside over districts in which most of the children learn to read and graduate. Daniel Lowengard, who will begin as interim superintendent in January, said as much at a news conference Tuesday at which Vargas announced he would resign at the end of the year.

"If you look across this nation, at all the urban districts, they are not successful," said Lowengard, a former superintendent of Syracuse schools.

Superintendents can simply hope to banish a little insanity. To wrest a few wasted dollars from a monstrous bureaucracy. To provide a few more resources to children who deserve an education.

The school board hired outside the box with Vargas, who was a school counselor and former Rochester school board president. He announced his resignation this week, having lost a power struggle with a school board that wants a more active role in managing the district.

Vargas leaves behind a district where less than 5 percent of elementary school students are passing state English language arts exams. The graduation rate is stuck below 50 percent. Of the kids who make it to college, only one in 10 get a degree.

But the district has more social workers than it did when he arrived. And more reading teachers, more learning time, more extracurricular activities and more summer learning opportunities.

Vargas said he underestimated the strength of the bureaucracy. And how hard it would be to accomplish even basic things.

Ending the health care coverage for the deceased was relatively easy because dead people don't want insurance. Getting a few free parking places for parents at central office was a different story.

It took 15 months of negotiation to free up some spots so that city parents — who are considerably poorer than central office employees — could have a place to park when they came to register their children. In the past, parents had been sent to register in the back of a badly labeled building in a brownfield site on St. Paul Street. The front of the building was vacant, and its facade featured rows of broken windows and falling bricks.

"The place looked like Beirut," Vargas said.

He moved the student placement center to the downtown central office, and after a year or so, he managed to get a few parking places for parents. Well-compensated bureaucrats still have their nice real estate and free parking, but at least parents are no longer sent to wander a brownfield site.

Another small victory is the fact that there are now two social workers at School 3. Longtime readers have heard me mention the book *Facing Our Challenges* many, many times. It was written by fifth-graders at School 3 who were asked to write an essay about a problem they'd faced.

Some told stories of getting a bike stolen or struggling to remember a locker combination. But fully one-third of the essays described serious, severe and often violent trauma. Of the 39 children, five had fathers who were shot or taken to jail. More than one child had witnessed an attempted or successful

murder. When Vargas became superintendent, the hundreds of children at this school had one social worker. Many other schools were sharing a social worker. In a district with an \$800 million annual budget, this was criminal. Vargas was able to shift enough resources so that now each school has at least one full-time social worker.

That's not enough, he said Thursday. The children need so much more. The district is no longer buying health insurance for dead people, but there remains profound waste. Vargas said there are savings to be found in transportation, information technology, central office and elsewhere.

There are many factors outside the Rochester School District's control, but there is no doubt that its \$800 million annual budget could be better spent to help kids learn. That will fall to the next person who tries to lead at 131 W. Broad St.

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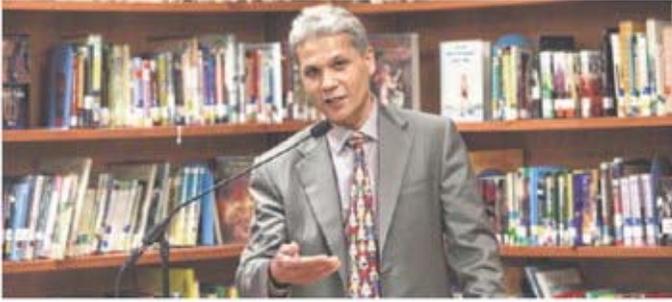
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There have been small victories for city schools Superintendent Bolgen Vargas.

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