

## A new day for Rochester schools

### Schools

#### Lowengard begins as the interim superintendent

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Friday marked the beginning of a new tenure atop the Rochester School District. Former Syracuse Superintendent Daniel Lowengard steps in as the new interim superintendent, replacing Bolgen Vargas.

Vargas is stepping down at the end of the year, six months before his contract is up, after four and a half years leading the district. He is widely credited with having put the district on a strong financial footing and refocusing

See **SCHOOLS**, Page **4A**



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Daniel Lowengard talks about his plans as the new Rochester School District interim

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Continued from Page 3A

on priorities, but ultimately could not manage to cooperate with the school board.

Lowengard began as a teacher in Syracuse in 1972 and eventually became superintendent, serving for five years before retiring in 2011. He also served as superintendent for Utica for eight years.

After his retirement, he was a consultant for the New York State Education Department, a role that brought him to Rochester several times.

Below is an edited conversation with Lowengard from Dec. 30, two days before his official starting date.

## **What are some areas where you hope to leave a mark on the Rochester School District?**

Some of it is structural. One of the bad things about education is that we do it all by ourselves; we do it in isolation. Most teachers, in urban districts or anywhere, end up teaching by themselves. We need to make sure there are opportunities for teachers to watch one another and coach one another, and have team meetings and faculty meetings. The more we open up classrooms and have non-evaluative observations, the more we get better.

It's a culture shift to make sure teachers understand we're in this to work together and get better at it. That's the piece we've missed, and not just Rochester but all urban districts.

I use the term 'urban specialist.' What we do is a lot different from teaching in other places. Yes, we're dealing with kids who often times have grown up in poverty, and there are issues of race and gender, but that's why we're here. We're the specialists who have done this.

## **What lessons did you learn in your time working for NYSED?**

I had the opportunity to sit in hundreds of classrooms with no other responsibility but to watch people teach. In my career of 39 years, I never had that opportunity. Even as a principal or whatever, you're pulled in so many different directions.

Again, what I noticed is teachers are isolated. They don't get to watch other people teach, they don't get regular feedback on their practice. There's enormous pressure from the state and federal government to improve scores, and that's not how you improve scores — just putting pressure on teachers to teach better.

How it happens is, you get a collection of teachers who want to work together and they collaborate, give one another feedback, and the instruction improves and the kids do better and the scores go up. There is no other way, and there's no shortcut. Everyone's frustrated with how urban kids are doing and they want something to happen overnight, but it doesn't work that way.

The problem — and I lay most of this on the state — is we've made learning not really fun anymore, or not really creative. We're not tapping into kids' minds. We're trying to get them to do well on tests. That may be one measure, but it's certainly not the measure we want to use.

It's everyone that has to do a better job. That includes the community and parents, and also students have a responsibility. I think we've gotten away from that. Learning isn't something where you take a pill and get better; it's something you have to work at, and I think having that conversation with kids is important. We have to have a good partnership with our parents, too. Sometimes people are critical of parents and their role, but the truth is, those parents were our students too. Casting blame on anyone doesn't make things better. We have to roll up our sleeves and work together.

## **How does the 'interim' label affect how you approach this job?**

Of course, I've never done it. But I really think it's a freeing experience. It seems like I can push even harder in some areas than I was able to in my other superintendencies. Because then, you're very focused on the long haul and where your support is, and you take a more gradual approach to change. I think in this role you can push the organization a little bit harder.

The biggest priority is the classroom: keeping class sizes small and making sure our money is well spent. And the next thing, which I think Bolgen has talked about, is how to rightsize the district. We've lost

students, we've closed some buildings, so that whole process has to be woven into our whole construction program. We need to have the right number of people in the right number of buildings, then plan for the next five years.

We have the habit of spending every dollar that comes in. You don't want to do that. You have to get in the habit of spending less than what's coming in, and we're not there. That's the piece I really have to look at. If we're going to do something different, what do we cut? That's a hard decision. And everyone will have input in that.

### **What role do you see Bolgen Vargas playing in the next six months?**

He's been a huge help and very forthcoming with his time. We've been so busy filling me in on what's going on that we haven't had much time to talk much about his role.

There are a couple of initiatives he's started that I'll want him to continue to work on. The attendance piece, where you go out to visit homes — I hope to have more people involved in that. Reading by third grade is something he's passionate about.

I also have to remember that my role is not just to make this transition smooth — which I think it will be — but on the other end too.

A lot of this distraction that happens with superintendents really is counterproductive for the whole organization. To the kids, it really doesn't matter who their superintendent is. What matters is how they're being treated and how the instruction is going. I think sometimes as adults we get in the way of that, when our role actually is to support it.

If the board wants my advice, I'd say there are people I've met already here in Rochester who would be great leaders for the future here, and that's where we should focus our attention — on someone with connections to Rochester who would come and stay and not necessarily be looking for their next position ... I think this idea of searching all over the place is a mistake.

Everybody wants to see this done. With Rochester, you hear a lot about the olden days, but people want to see our kids do well. So I think the momentum's there to get beyond the searching and just get to the point of concentrating on schools and instruction.

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