

## No bold ideas to fix city schools

### Schools

District superintendent urges focus on process

#### JUSTIN MURPHY

@CITIZENMURPHY

Over the last 10 years of the generations- long effort to improve student achievement in the Rochester City School District, there has been remarkably little disagreement regarding actual classroom priorities.

Jean-Claude Brizard drew fierce criticism for his approach to labor, but was clear on the need for increased emphasis on early education and more career and technical training. His successor, Bolgen Vargas, ultimately departed due to a soured relationship with the school board, but there was no disagreement over his push to improve attendance and expand offerings in the

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arts. Both men also called for funding equity for the most vulnerable children and increased cooperation with outside partners.

All that consensus, with little to show for it. Despite incremental progress in graduation, attendance and suspension rates, a child in Rochester still receives, on average, as poor an education as any child in the country.

New Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams hasn't offered any particular criticism of those consensus policies, either. She thus far has offered no bold proposals; there is no military academy, no new partnership with a local college, no buildings being closed.

Instead, she hopes to achieve distinct improvement by focusing on the mundane: workflow, communication and interpersonal connections.

Thursday night, a team of her top administrators presented a series of dense action plans, based on several months of study and feedback from thousands of people. The five documents are unsparing in their criticism, collected via surveys of students, parents and building and district-level staff.

Parents reported feeling unwelcome and underappreciated, particularly at district headquarters. Building administrators said they aren't given enough autonomy to run their schools, while central office staffers complained they're kept out of the loop.

While the written reports include some concrete ideas for consideration — for instance, increased reliance on “weighted” budgeting that provides more money for more vulnerable students — they more often call for increased attention to points of friction that lead to breakdowns in the system, regardless of priorities.

Perhaps the most prominent is a call to establish schools, and their principals, as the locus of innovation and responsibility. For instance, one report asks whether the district should rethink its current policy of having positions such as school counselors, registrars and math and reading intervention teachers report directly to central office rather than the building where they work.

Deane-Williams also pledged to revamp the way the district collects, presents and uses data, making it more userfriendly for teachers and principals.

Her most pointed comments had to do with funding and opportunity equity across the district. Some schools, she pointed out, get more funding and perform better than others.

“Our children in Rochester do not have an equitable education,” she said. “We must and will address this. ... We need to get our house in order.”

It is just as well the plans include no big-ticket ideas, because the finance report paints a bleak picture of the 2017-18 budget process. The district is facing a gap of more than \$65 million, its largest gap since 2011-12.

That includes another increase in charter school tuition, which now stands at a projected \$81 million, as well as increased labor costs and decreased projected state funding.

[JMURPHY7@Gannett.com](mailto:JMURPHY7@Gannett.com)



**Rochester City School District Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams offered a plan for improvement that includes no big-ticket items.**