

Board member Natalie Sheppard rips RCSD, state

Speech accuses them of undermining authority

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Rochester school board member Natalie Sheppard tore into the district administration and state Education Department at a board meeting Thursday, daring the community to stand up for itself and demand changes.

In a remarkable five-minute speech, full of passion but short on specifics, Sheppard accused the district administration of disrespecting board members and failing to act upon its “chatter” about solutions.

“It is very difficult to do the work of a commissioner when the authority of the board is constantly undermined,” she said. “I’m not asking you — I’m telling you. The authority of the board needs to be respected.”

Her speech reflected a growing tension between the school board, particularly its newer members, and the administration at a time when the district is going through its most turbulent period in years. Dozens of people protested before the meeting regarding special education problems and the death of 14-year-old Trevyan Rowe, who had a learning disability.

For those reasons and others, the state Education Department recently appointed Kenneth Eastwood, the recently retired superintendent from Middletown City School District, as ‘distinguished educator,’ a mandated consultant.

Sheppard called that an encroachment on city residents’ power of election, and his projected salary of \$200,000 turned into a derisive chant for a rowdy crowd, more evidence of the opposition Eastwood will face when he arrives next month.

“I don’t know who this distinguished educator is, but I know who he ain’t,” said Riccardo Adams, a parent and the husband of former school board member Mary Adams. “I know he ain’t some mythical unicorn. He’s not the Black Panther. ... I know this — me and the community, we ain’t going to get pushed out. And I hope the board stands up too.”

Later at the board meeting, Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams announced changes and reinforcements to the district’s policy around notifying parents when students are absent.

- Attendance must be taken within 15 minutes of the beginning of the day.
- Automated calls will go out to parents one hour after the day begins.
- If there is no answer, a person will make a phone call.
- If there is no answer, someone will drive to the house.
- Automated calls will be repeated three additional times throughout the day if the parents cannot be reached.

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RCSD Board Vice President Willa Powell speaks to Van Henri White, board president, during a board meeting. MAX SCHULTE/@MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Natalie Sheppard, RCSD Board Commissioner, after her speech to the community. MAX SCHULTE/@MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER