

Carry on, RCSD partners say

After Vargas, groups pledge to continue collaboration

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The Rochester School District in the past several years has increased its collaboration with a variety of outside organizations and other branches of local government. The day after Rochester schools Superintendent Bolgen Vargas announced his impending resignation, leaders of those groups pledged that momentum would not be lost.

Since Vargas took the reins four years ago, he has repeatedly called on partner organizations to lend support to key initiatives, particularly early literacy and attendance. For example, the Ad Council

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Van Henri White, left, Rochester school board president, and Superintendent Bolgen Vargas talk about Vargas' resignation and what comes next for the city school district.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE, @TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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of Rochester donated its services for a marketing campaign around attendance, and the city of Rochester and the Rochester Red Wings have worked with the district to distribute tens of thousands of books to children.

School Board President Van White said Tuesday that the board intends to continue with the academic priorities established under Vargas. Furthermore, the proposed new model of governance would draw more on the school board and less on the superintendent, lessening the impact of a leader's departure.

The first person to try out that role will be incoming Interim Superintendent Daniel Lowengard, a former district leader in Syracuse.

One of the district's most active partners is Monroe Community College. They work together on everything from early childhood education through the ROC the Future initiative to collegelevel courses available through several district high schools, including PTECH at Edison Tech and Early College International High School.

MCC President Anne Kress said Vargas has been "remarkably collaborative" but predicted that work would continue apace after he leaves. "A lot of the partnerships predated the current superintendent, so we would imagine we'll continue our engagement with the district as a whole," she said. "Our partnerships aren't with any particular leader as much as they're in service of the students of the district."

Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren questioned the timing of Vargas' departure in a statement Tuesday night, worrying that "a midyear shift could be detrimental to the very children that the school district needs to foster and protect."

On Wednesday, she said the first she heard of the news was Tuesday morning when Vargas called her, though like most of the rest of the city she had an inkling that the relationship had deteriorated.

"In my mind, all the parties involved could have said, 'We're not renewing the contract ... however, let's work through the budget process and close out the year,'" she said.

Warren acknowledged she and Vargas have not always seen eye-to-eye — most recently on the question of busing students downtown — but said their conversations were always respectful. Like Kress, she does not expect any lost momentum in city-school district partnerships, including the recently announced Beacon School initiative at School 17 .

Warren campaigned in 2013 on a promise of greater interest in the city schools. She said Wednesday, though, that she would need to hear some guidance from New York state before attempting to exert any greater influence, including during the current transition period.

"This is an issue the state needs to look at in all the Big Five districts: what role the mayor plays in education," she said. "That hasn't been laid out. ... (A mayor) can't just say, 'I want more control or more influence in the school district,' but I do not know what that means. You don't want to go in there and make things worse."

She predicted the state would let its newly implemented school receivership structure play out before making any decisions about aspects of mayoral control of schools.

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