

## **RCSD: Path Forward, then '100 steps back'**

### **Justin Murphy**

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Even on the day it announced an ambitious future vision under the title "Path Forward," the Rochester City School District couldn't escape the problems that have dogged it from the past to the present.

One of the district's key takeaways in listening to students, parents and staff over the past several months, Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams said, is the need for better communication. She announced some initiatives to improve that, including the "At Your Service" help line for parents.

Earlier Thursday, though, a top district administrator apparently miscommunicated in a serious way during a meeting with staff at Lincoln Park School 44 in the 19th Ward. According to school board member Mary Adams, people at that meeting were told the school would be closing after the 2018-19 school year, and would not receive any new kindergartners.

Adams, appearing at her final meeting after six years on the board, broke into tears while chastising the district for failing to respect families and employees.

"I just feel nothing has changed in the last six years with how this district operates with respect to parents, and the lack of respect for teachers, the school community, my neighbors; people who put in endless blood, sweat and tears for no pay," she said. "Nothing has changed in my six years with respect to that, and that is the biggest value I hoped to bring to this board, is community voice."

The administrator who led that School 44 meeting, School Chief Shirley Green, said the staff had misunderstood; she was simply laying out three options for what might happen, one of which is closure. Deane-Williams said it appeared to have been a case of miscommunication.

"I'm sorry, but that's B.S.," Adams responded.

School 44 was slated to close once before, but pressure from community members resulted in it staying open at least until School 16, the neighborhood's other community school, returned to a renovated building on Post Avenue. Its future is uncertain; as Adams pointed out, the decision about School 44 in part drove the entire Path Forward initiative.

John Boutet, a 19th Ward education activist, was in the meeting with Green and confirmed Adams' account of what happened in a post on the Southwest Tribune website, calling for a "community- wide mobilization" to keep the school open.

The school board has not yet been presented with its options for new placement arrangements, and no decision has been made.

Later in the meeting, the district again came under fire from a longtime loyalist.

Makita Saloane leads the Parent Advisory Council and has been one of the district's most actively involved parents for more than 10 years. She complained that PAC had been given no formal role in the Path Forward process, though parents were consulted in other settings.

"We've been through some very dark times, but I would say this is the absolute worst year," she said. "I feel like we've taken 100 steps back in terms of (parents) being involved at the district level. ... I'm tired. Ti-red, with a capital T. I'm tired of this."

She then brought up an incident from December in which her daughter, a student at Wilson Magnet High School, had been suspended for fighting with a friend. She disputed the district's account of the incident and said she's now been waiting six weeks to hear back from the rapid-response parent help line.

"I've seen them not suspend white kids ... because they're afraid of the backlash from white middle-class parents," she said. "But you don't have a problem suspending my little black girl."

While suspensions overall are down sharply in the district over the last three years, black students continue to be disciplined at a higher rate than white students.

In a recent visit by the New York State Education Department, for instance, the district was found to suspend disproportionately its black students with disabilities, an issue it has been sanctioned for many years in a row.

"I am just tired of seeing it. I hear it, I get emails, text messages, inbox, phone calls about the same thing all the time," Saloane said. "And I'm not special. It's happened to me, too. And I am tired. Y'all need to do something."

With that, she shook her head and walked away from the podium.

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### **Adams**