

## SHAKEUP AT CITY SCHOOLS

Superintendent Vargas to resign in December; ex-Syracuse chief to become interim leader

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Rochester Superintendent Bolgen Vargas will resign from his post at the end of December, six months before his contract ends, he announced Tuesday.

Vargas, 53, will stay on through June as an adviser to former Syracuse Superintendent Dan Lowengard, who will serve as interim superintendent while the school board searches for a permanent replacement.

He will continue to receive health benefits and his \$195,000 annual salary. Lowengard will receive a pro-rated sal

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Daniel Lowengard, right, who will become the interim Rochester School District superintendent, is congratulated by the current schools chief, Bolgen Vargas.

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**Vargas**

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ary of at least \$175,000, the pay Vargas first received as an interim superintendent, as well as a housing stipend, said school board President Van White.

In an interview Tuesday morning, both Vargas and White said that although they share a common vision for how to improve student achievement, their philosophical differences about the balance of power between the school board and superintendent have proven insurmountable.

Discussions about Vargas' departure began when it became evident the board would not extend his contract next year, White said. For his part, Vargas said he likely would not have sought another term anyway, given the rancorous relationship.

"Everybody has known for quite some time that reasonable people can disagree about the role of the superintendent and the board, and that's something we disagree on," Vargas said. "When there's no certainty about my future, it's not easy to lead. ... This is in the best interest of the district."

Asked about his plans for the future, Vargas would only say he has several options to consider.

The last year has been marked by notable advances in the actual work of educating children combined with increasing strife between Vargas' administration and the school board — the sort of "adult problem" both sides have repeatedly pledged to avoid.

The tension was at its highest in March, when Vargas began legal proceedings to sue the school board after it voted to strip some of his powers relating to hiring and firing within his exempt personnel group, including his top advisers.

It seemed certain then that another shoe was soon to drop, especially after it came out that the board rejected Vargas' offer to drop the lawsuit threat in exchange for a contract extension.

The two sides, however, settled into an uneasy detente over the summer and even offered praise for each other at times. When asked about the matter Sept. 30, Vargas said: "I have come to the conclusion that it is better not to follow through with the lawsuit. However, the issue doesn't go away in terms of what is the role of the superintendent versus that of the school board."

That was evident in an interview Tuesday morning, when both Vargas and White, with great courtesy, sparred over ownership of some recent district advances, including the East High School agreement with the University of Rochester.

Vargas pointed out that he was the first one to float the idea in 2013; White acknowledged that and then explained how the negotiation process with the university was led by the board, not the administration.

White cast the board's decision as a chance to make a fundamental change to the way the district operates. Even the incremental gains made under Vargas, he said, are not good enough.

"We've continually gone to central office and taken direction from the superintendent — not just Dr. Vargas — and sat on our hands. And that has not worked; no one can dispute that," White said. "What I'd like to be a part of ... is a process that changes all that in a dramatic way. With all due respect to Dr. Vargas and the work that he's done ... it's not good enough. And that's no slight on him. There are significant challenges out there."

The transition from Vargas to Lowengard and then to a permanent replacement should be less disruptive than past transitions, White said, because the district is not looking to change its core vision.

"We believe that the collaborative approach, the focus on these particular initiatives, is not contingent upon one man," White said.

Rather, the board wants someone who agrees with its interpretation of a superintendent's duties, and Vargas did not.

Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren was critical of the development.

"Although as mayor I do not have a say in this matter, I do believe it would have been more appropriate to announce that the superintendent was leaving at the end of his term and allow him to serve until a permanent replacement is hired.

"A midyear shift could be detrimental to the very children that the school district needs to foster and protect," Warren said.

## 'Change is not easy'

Vargas was named interim superintendent May 11, 2011, a month after his predecessor, Jean-Claude Brizard, left for the top education job in Chicago.

Brizard left with little goodwill. He pushed an aggressive school closure plan, fought with the Rochester Teachers Association over evaluations and merit pay and vigorously supported charter schools and standardized testing.

His relationship with the school board was also uneven. "Good riddance," board member Cynthia Elliott said when she heard he was leaving.

Vargas was seen as a safe choice for the interim post despite having no experience as an administrator, even as a building principal. He worked for two decades as a counselor in the Greece Central School District and served on the Rochester school board from 1996 to 2003, including four years as board president.

White was one of two board members to vote against Vargas' appointment. He said it was because of Vargas' uncertain status as a member of the Greece teachers union. He also disagreed with the decision in 2012 to hire Vargas for the permanent position, saying he should have been excluded for consideration since he was serving as the interim superintendent.

Upon his appointment to the interim position, Vargas immediately faced several serious challenges, including finalizing a budget that cut more than 800 positions to close a \$76.5 million gap and negotiating a new contract with the teachers union.

He eventually hired back many of those laid-off employees and quickly established a set of priorities different from Brizard's. He emphasized early interventions, particularly reading by third grade, and expanding the time students spend in school as well as the range of opportunities they have there.

"I found a broken system and I approached it to fix it with courage," he said Tuesday when asked to describe his legacy. "And change is not easy."

He had the interim tag removed in 2012 and signed a four-year contract worth \$195,000 per year. Since then, he introduced some stability to the budget process despite declining enrollment and found dollars for academic priorities.

Vargas tried to slow the carousel of school phase-outs, consolidations and renamings, especially at the secondary level. He floated the idea of having local colleges sponsor or run some schools, then several months later was faced with a state ultimatum at East High.

After some negotiation, the University of Rochester agreed to take the school over, a project that is costing the district about \$10 million. At the same time, Charlotte is being closed to avoid a similar state citation, while Edison was reconstituted as a single career-focused high school and Wilson had its International Baccalaureate program beefed up.

More generally, Vargas eliminated early dismissal on Wednesdays, hired dozens of reading teachers and added more sports and music programs. To pay for it, he snipped millions from the budget, particularly in health care savings and central administration spending.

Whether due to his focus on long-term strategy or other obstacles, however, student success measures have thus far proven more difficult to move.

The August 2011 graduation rate was 51 percent, the same as it was in August 2014, though the bar for graduation was raised by the state. Despite Vargas' concerted effort to improve attendance, many Rochester students still miss school on a regular basis. More than nine out of 10 children in grades 3-8 scored less than proficient on the most recent state math and English tests.

Vargas has had relatively few public problems with the RTA, but the Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester, the principals union, has been a different story. In February 2014 it voted no confidence in him, citing poor communication.

In turn, he accused that union of obstinacy in the face of reform. He asked the state Legislature in February for more freedom in assembling his executive team, which would likely mean making some ASAR members exempt from collective bargaining. The March school board vote to whittle away at his hiring authority had the opposite effect, tallying a victory for the administrators union.

"We have been very vocal about central office cabinet inconsistency, lack of dialogue, lack of planning and collaboration, and the attrition of seasoned school administrators," ASAR President Tim Cliby said in a statement Tuesday. "With the anticipated collaborative atmosphere that comes with change, we expect great strides will be taken to improve the quality of life for the students

of this district.”

Since White became president in early 2014, the board has assumed a livelier interest in managing the district’s affairs.

Though the resultant disagreement between the two sides played out at central office, White said it still has a significant impact on what happens in the classroom.

He cited the negotiations this summer with the Rochester-Genesee Regional Transportation Authority as proof, saying that boardroom decisions affected where students take the school bus.

“Governance isn’t an adult issue,” he said. “If you can’t resolve that governance dispute, it impacts what happens to kids.”

More recently, the board clashed with Vargas over his transfer of an all-boys program from School 9. During that debate, board member Jose Cruz wondered aloud whether the board had overstepped its proper role. RTA President Adam Urbanski said it was clearly time for a change, but he would have preferred that the board retain Vargas and work out its difficulties with him.

“He’s a very decent man who meant to do good things and accomplished many of them,” he said. “But he failed to do as much as he could have with the support of the board.”

As he leaves, Vargas said the most important task facing the district is to continue shifting money away from administrative costs and into the classroom. He estimated that there is another \$80 million of available money to be redirected.

When Brizard left in 2011, he acknowledged that a strained relationship with the school board was a factor in his departure.

“The dynamic of the board, it would be dishonest to say it did not play a role,” he said then. “Every decision was a heavy lift. The in-fighting was distracting for everyone.”

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**Rochester Schools Superintendent Bolgen Vargas listens as Van Henri White, school board president, talks about the resignation.**

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