

Superintendent hints at overhaul

Changes

Changes sought in how central office relates to schools

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New Rochester City School District Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams referred Wednesday to plans for a significant restructuring of top-level administrators, with the goal of becoming more responsive to the specific needs of individual schools.

She spoke about the changes in her first public remarks since assuming the job, and just her third day in the office. She was visiting Edison Tech High School as part of her “listening tour.”

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Rochester schools Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams chats briefly with Jasmine Cruz, who is taking an exploratory Career Technical Education class in digital media at Edison Tech during a tour of the school Wednesday.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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Already, she has decided that her five school chiefs — the main liaisons between central office and principals — will report to her directly rather than to her deputy superintendents. “What we’re going to see is a need to transition our district office into a service provider for schools,” she said. “Right now we’re organized very much into departments, which can become siloed inadvertently. ... I’ll be looking to increase the voice of chiefs and principals and teachers to be sure each school can identify the things it needs to be successful.”

Deane-Williams oversaw a similar restructuring at her most recent job as a top administrator in Boston Public Schools, she said. The goal is to let building-level leaders drive the changes they think they need the most.

One school might want help developing new curriculum, while another might need support on attendance, discipline or transportation. At Edison Tech, for instance, Principal Walter Larkin Jr. said he would like to see support for student internships and coops, and an investment in outdoor athletic facilities. Edison grew in 201516 at the same time that East High School shrank; it is now the largest school in the district. "I've been in the business long enough to know there are no single solutions," Deane-Williams said. "The culture of communities and schools is very much an area one needs to respect and understand ... before you can identify what things would be most helpful."

Her comments echoed the advice of her two interim predecessors, Dan Lowengard and Linda Cimusz, as they reflected on their long careers in education. Deane-Williams also talked about relationship-building strategies that align with recent research by the University of Rochester's Kara Finnigan.

The changes do not necessarily mean a round of firing and hiring; she also spoke about the need for stability alongside urgency for change.

Edison Tech was a fitting choice for her first official school visit as superintendent, as it embodies many of the district's greater challenges and strengths.

After it was lambasted in an outside review, the Edison campus has been reorganized as one school, and its career and technical education programs have been strengthened and realigned with local jobs. There is a significant focus on restorative justice rather than suspensions for misbehavior.

Positive changes on paper, though, were thrown partly off course by miscalculation and problems with implementation. Combining several schools into one, and absorbing many students from the closing of Charlotte High School, led to behavioral problems that took half the year to stamp out.

The school also had an abrupt principal change halfway through the year. Larkin Jr., the current principal, is an Edison alumnus with a record of connecting with at-risk high school students.

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Edison Tech Principal Walter Larken and Assistant Principal Jacob Scott give Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams a tour of the school Wednesday.

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