

## City schools chief works to gain trust

### Schools

#### Deane-Williams confronts organizational dysfunction

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On her visit to Enrico Fermi School 17 last month, Rochester City School District Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams was directed by her tour guides to a display case outside a dual-language first-grade classroom.

The children, English and Spanish speakers alike, had written and colored books titled *En El Mapa*, with pictures and Spanish sentences showing them in their houses, schools and neighborhoods.

The standard protocol for such moments is straightforward: The visiting dignitary flips thoughtfully through the pages and marvels at the children's precociousness.

Deane-Williams squinted at one of the drawings and handed the book back — an unexpected deviation from the script. She had questions.

How had the teachers scaffolded the project for the students? Was data-track-

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**Barbara Deane-Williams, left, Rochester City School District superintendent, is greeted by 10th-grader Alexis Dygert, a Junior ROTC cadet, who escorted her to a meeting at Rochester Early College International High School.**

JAMIE GERMANO /@JGERMANO1/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



**RCSD Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams is joined by Van White, city school board president, before a meeting at Rochester Early College International High School.**

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ing incorporated into their grade-level team meetings? Did they embed professional development as well? What enrichment was being provided for students above grade level?

Principal Caterina Leone-Mannino was ready with the right answers. It made Deane-Williams smile broadly in a way the children's charmingly crooked lettering had not.

"See, this is the kind of thing that should be happening everywhere," she said. Then she headed into the classroom to look at its data wall.

### New approach, grounded in theory

For decades, ambitious and well-intentioned improvement plans in the city school district have failed in spectacular fashion — or, more frequently, foundered and broken apart out of the public eye, wounded fatally by funding cuts, leadership changes or bureaucratic malaise.

Each of those efforts has left scars on the district. Employees distrust new ideas from new superintendents and district families have learned wariness through generations.

Abandoned ideas from past administrations have left innumerable, barely visible bumps and divots in the district's policies and structures, threatening to snag new initiatives like riverbed shipwrecks.

Deane-Williams, who became superintendent last August after a career in the suburbs west of Rochester, has new initiatives, too. More career and technical education for younger students; more community schools; curriculum that speaks more clearly to black and brown children.

Her greatest ambition, though, is not anew program or pedagogical emphasis. Instead, she believes the only way to "fix" the district is to clear the detritus that clogs its workflow, thinking and relationships. And the only way to do that is to change how every single teacher, administrator and support staffer in the district views her job and interacts with her students, colleagues and bosses.

Where others have tried to overcome organizational dysfunction, Deane-Williams is confronting it directly.

"There's too many easy solutions out there," she said. "If someone says, 'We're going to do this and that (to solve everything),' that doesn't show a deep respect for the depth of an urban school district. ... The system needs to find coherence."

Her initial approach in Rochester has been different than in other districts she has led. Elsewhere, she said, much of her early energy went toward finding savings in the budget process. In Greece, it had to do with facilities.

“Here, I (had to) get immediately to work on systems, because I heard over and over and over again, that’s what is stopping us, and I don’t want to be having this conversation again three years from now,” she said. “It’s an opportunity to test my theory that it’s all about relationships and deep connections. Not just my connections, but everyone’s connections.”

As for measuring results, Deane-Williams did not hesitate to set a measure.

“I’ll gladly stand on the graduation rates and reading and math scores improving,” she said. “That’s how you’ll know the system works. ... At the end of three years, they should look very different. If they don’t, you should be asking a lot of questions.”

### **Repairing relationships**

The most noticeable feature of Deane-Williams’ style is a dogged devotion to theory and process. She speaks fluent education-ese with only a slight English accent; it warms her heart to hear a school principal make an erudite reference to, say, Tushman and O’Reilly’s work on congruence.

“She’s a practitioner, and that has made a huge difference in her ability to appreciate the challenges of the staff, the students and the families,” School Board President Van White said. “You can’t fool her about what you are and are not able to do.”

One of her first assignments for her top-level staff was a reading list of five books on how complex systems, in schools or elsewhere, succeed or fail. Teachers, too, can earn professional development credits by reading one of several books and sending her a response in writing.

“She committed to reading those reflections on those books and responding to them — that’s unheard of,” Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski said. “We haven’t seen that before. ... Her approach is, if people aren’t doing what they could be doing, she doesn’t jump to the conclusion that it’s because of malintent or lack of interest. She concludes it may be lack of information or knowledge or experience, then proceeds to offer opportunities to (teach them).”

Deane-Williams places her most fervent belief in a model educators call “relational coordination.” Developed by Brandeis University researcher Jody Hoffer Gittel and based at first on studies of airlines and hospitals, the thesis is that an organization cannot reach its full capability without thoughtful attention to relationships among individuals.

There are several sorts of unhealthy relationships within RCSD: between students and teachers, parents and administrators, building principals and central office staff. The superintendent intends to rehabilitate as many bonds as possible through the use of restorative practice, which is seen more commonly as a tool for students.

“We have people here who really want to do the right work, and they want to reenergize and re-focus,” Deane-Williams said. “(I want) to ask

everyone to please pause and be still for a few moments. Why did you want to become an educator? What do you want to accomplish in your life? Because this isn't a job; it's a mission."

That work — securing the cooperation of thousands of adults in a new Jubilee — is one part of the process. Employees would then use those restored relationships to support one another and spread best practices, under Deane-Williams' watchful eye.

An example: Earlier this year, a student with significant trauma and disabilities entered a new school building for the first time. He immediately entered into what Deane-Williams called "the 'fight' part of 'fight-or-flight.'" The situation at the school was volatile for several hours. Seeing an opportunity, Deane-Williams went there herself and watched the staff work with the student.

Where was the social worker? Where were the assistant principals? How were they putting past training into practice? What had the student intake process looked like? She also requested that another, more experienced principal call the school and give some guidance.

"When we have a school that's having trouble in some area, rather than bringing in a consultant or someone from district office, we're combining leaders and teacher leaders from across the city to support their peers," Deane-Williams said. "There's no single school that does everything perfectly, but we're seeing a real willingness to create a network of schools and partnerships."

Relationship-building will also entail aggressive adoption of the anti-racism work the district has been doing with Joy DeGruy, a nationally recognized expert on the topic. Deane-Williams has promised to make awareness of racial bias a prominent theme in ongoing training for all district staff.

"We're really trying to provide our principals and leaders with opportunities to (talk and think) about their culture, their heritage, their race, their experience ... and think about it in terms of leadership decisions," she said.

Ericka Simmons, president of the district's Parent Advisory Council, said she's been impressed with Deane-Williams' pledge to trim central office and put more resources in school buildings, but wanted to withhold further praise until more time passes.

"She's still fairly new, so just like anything you get new, it's shiny and pretty and works very well in the beginning, but as time goes on the kinks start to come out," Simmons said. "We have high hopes, but the district seems to let parents down every time we get our hopes up."

### **Yet to win first budget**

The district's 2017-18 budget proposal is noteworthy for adding scores of teachers in order to gain compliance with state and federal regulations on services for students who are falling behind, or those with disabilities or another native language.

Deane-Williams said she was surprised to see how unevenly money and staff were distributed across the district and said her goal is to level the playing field without depriving high-performing schools. It is a difficult path to walk; after the initial budget presentation, the district heard from angry parents and staff at School 12 regarding what they saw as insufficient funding for its arts and enrichment programs.

The district hopes to save in special education by reducing the number of students who are classified with a disability, instead helping some of them through less stringent systems. And it is moving 20 special education administrators back to school buildings, where they will coach rather than supervise.

More generally, Deane-Williams said she hopes to broaden the ways in which exemplary teachers and administrators can help their colleagues. As an example, four principals next year will get one day a week to spend visiting and observing other schools.

“Adult learning goes with student learning,” she said. “We want every student at grade level, and we want every employee engaged in a professional learning community. It will be interesting to see how it goes.”

Some problems lend themselves more readily to harmonious, restorative solutions than others. One brewing conflict in the district right now is the fate of Rochester Early College International High School, an academic bright spot that is being steadily squeezed out of building space by its growing Genesee Street roommate, Wilson Foundation Academy.

Wilson Foundation will grow out fully to K-8 next year, and it will need the third-floor classrooms that Early College currently occupies. The plan has always been for Early College to locate at the new downtown Monroe Community College campus — dozens of its students attend classes there every week — but those two sides haven’t been able to achieve a physical fit, either.

There was talk of moving Early College to the Charlotte campus, but the long bus ride would make it impossible for students to attend college classes during the day. At a meeting last month, Early College Principal Uma Mehta expressed concern that some of the school’s grant funding could be revoked if it can’t keep its college attendance numbers up.

“We understand you’re out of space here,” Deane-Williams told Mehta and her colleagues. “We hear it every day.” Soothing words aside, though, Early College still lacks a landing space, so it will have to make do with reduced space in the same building next year and hope for better luck in 2018-19.

Similar challenges lie ahead wherever one looks — in the district’s receivership schools, in student attendance, in the Facilities Modernization Plan, in the implementation of the new Code of Conduct and recommendations of the Community Task Force on School Climate.

Deane-Williams, who is fond of pointing out that she already retired once, says her vision, if implemented as she hopes, will address all of these challenges, and others that arise.

“This to me is the opportunity of a lifetime,” she said. “And I feel more pressure for myself than from any of you, or the community. Because someone has to disrupt and interrupt what is going on here.

“The real question that people ask all the time is, can public schools in urban areas be saved? ... My answer is, I would not have taken the job here as public schools superintendent if I didn’t think Rochester could be the city that tells the story about how this gets done.”

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**Barbara Deane-Williams became RCSD superintendent last August.**

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