

RCSD considered adopting troubled charter school

EXCLUSIVE D&C INVESTIGATION

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Rochester School Board President Van White often talks about how the district needs to make a splash to win more city students away from charter schools. A concept he discussed with Dennis Francione last year certainly would have qualified.

Before the New York state Board of Regents voted earlier this month to close Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School, White and Francione, the school's founder and CEO, had discussed trying to fold the school into the district intact.

Neither was specific on the time frame, but White said the two began speaking about collaboration in general after a best practices summit for district and charter school leaders in May 2015. He also stressed that the adoption discussions ended once the state education department informed the school in January that it was recommending closure.

"I'm always for discussing opportunities to collaborate," White said. "However, when I learned he was having challenges with the Regents and other issues, I said to Dennis, 'We need to step back and wait to see how you can resolve those issues.'" There is no mechanism in state charter law for a charter school to join a traditional school district. One way to accomplish it would be if the school surrendered its charter and technically closed, then the district 'opened' the same school under its own aegis.

The district and RCMCS did collaborate in other areas, including professional development. In its charter, RCMCS said it would use RCSD lessons as a basis for its own curriculum.

The adoption discussions never reached the full city school board, which would have to approve such a venture. An RCSD spokesman said the district administration was not involved either.

"Conversations, yes. Plans, no," Francione said when asked about the contacts. "This would be advantageous to the city school district, and I would benefit as a mom-and-pop charter to get more resources from the city school district."

The city school district loses \$12,590 for every student who attends a charter school, and their numbers are rising rapidly. In 2007-08, there were 781 such students; in 2017-18 there will be a projected 5,900, consuming about 8 percent of the district's projected \$920 million budget.

While Rochester Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams has put special emphasis on providing adequate baseline services to all its students, White has pushed the district also to establish some beacons to retain families who otherwise might move out of the city or choose a charter or

private school.

His proposed military academy is one such idea; the East High School agreement with the University of Rochester is another.

Though the school adoption talks are dead, White said he intends to continue to speak with Francione, and others, about ways to import successful practices into the district. Notwithstanding the state's distinct negative assessment of RCMCS, he admired its August graduation rate of 75 percent.

As state observers noted, that graduation rate includes an unusually high number of local diplomas. RCMCS had 49 percent of students graduate with a Regents diploma by August, compared with 42 percent in RCSD and 77 percent statewide. A number of current and former RCMCS employees also claimed that grades and other data were falsified, a charge Francione denies.

"I'm surprised, because I think they were doing some good stuff," he said. "There were areas for improvement, absolutely. But when a school's trying and making progress, it's easy for folks that don't live in glass houses to throw stones. I can sympathize with the challenges Dennis had. ... He's in a very hard place, as all urban educators are."

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Van White, here at a past *Democrat and Chronicle* editorial board meeting, said he and Dennis Francione began speaking about collaboration in general back in 2015.

STAFF FILE PHOTO



Dennis Francione is the CEO at the Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School.

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