

Rapport with state is key for Deane-Williams

Schools

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Barbara Deane-Williams said Monday she plans to spend her first 100 days as Rochester City School District superintendent speaking with students, families, staff and other community members to better understand the district's strengths and challenges.

Her ability to work with the state education department and Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia, however, may prove to be equally determinative of her ultimate success in Rochester.

A superintendent in a large urban district has a significantly different dynamic with Albany than one in a rural or suburban district, where Deane-Williams has spent most of her career. Since Rochester and the rest of the Big Five districts don't raise revenue through property taxes, a much greater portion of their budget depends on the state Legislature's allotment. Furthermore, high-poverty districts have many more students who have faced significant trauma, don't speak English well or have disabilities. Test scores inevitably suffer, putting those districts in the cross-hairs of various state and federal interventions.

At the moment, that means receivership, a process by which superintendents are entrusted with significant autonomy in their most challenged schools. In return, the state ex-

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pects notable improvements within one or two years.

Rochester had two schools on the one-year improvement list in 201516, School 9 on North Clinton Avenue and Monroe High School; (Charlotte and East high schools were also listed, but the former shut down and the latter has partnered with the University of Rochester, removing state pressure for the moment). A decision from Elia is expected soon regarding whether enough progress was made — and, if it wasn't, what happens next.

As superintendent, Deane-Williams inherits the job of shaping the district response to state decrees. At her introductory press conference Monday, though, schools were restricted to a menu of six options for a plan. Three of them required removing the principal, and in some cases a large portion of staff.

The district gave serious consideration to removing principals from Leadership Academy for Young Men, and Integrated Arts and Technology High School. The two relatively new programs have shown progress in some respects — Leadership Academy graduated 52 percent of the students in its first senior class in 2015, better than the districtwide rate for black boys — but still struggle with attendance and test scores at the lower grades.

Integrated Arts principal Kevin Klein said Deputy Superintendent Christiana Otuwa told him June 21 he would be gone at the end of the year. When she returned two days later to speak with school staff, however,

more than 100 teachers and staff members were there to protest Klein's removal.

Similarly, staff and students at Leadership Academy mobilized to keep founding principal Wakili Moore in place.

"We know we have improvements to make — that's the case around the district," school counselor Callie Andler said. "But we've seen kids make significant character improvements, and that's not something you can capture with a test score."

James Weathers, a 2016 Leadership Academy graduate now enrolled at Cazenovia College, said having a successful black male role model like Moore was critical for him and his classmates.

"I understand that someone has to take the blame for the low grades," he said. "But there are great teachers and principals in the district that she said she is still reviewing the work that has already been done under Interim Superintendent Linda Cimusz, and former superintendent Bolgen not the case that Klein and Moore would necessarily have lost their jobs without the pushback from the schools."

"We were simultaneously getting results from Regents and graduation, and it was all kind of coming in at the same time we were having to put these plans together," Interim Superintendent Linda Cimusz said. "We were trying to be transparent and communicate about the possibilities."

Staff and students at both schools, as well as Klein and Moore themselves, said the state isn't putting enough value on creating a stable, caring environment for students. In a sense, the district is caught between the school community on one hand and the state on the other.

"A lot of our kids come from unstable homes and they need some stability," Klein said. "We're not making the headway we want to make with our seventh and eighth graders, but the longer kids stayed with us, the better performance they're having."

Moore declined to comment on whether Otuwa told him he would definitely be removed. Once his job was secure again, though, he said he was reinvigorated for the 2016-17 school year. "We already had plans in place for what we wanted to do in 16-17, but when this stuff happened — I think things happen for a reason," he said. "It took me to another level of inspiration."

JMURPHY7@Gannett work their butts off. Sometimes there's stuff you can blame on them, but not all the time."

In the end, both schools submitted SIG grant proposals that don't require changing the principal. The district maintains it is *.com* Vargas.

Teachers, students protest principal removals

Besides the receivership schools, the state also lists schools as priority (bad) or focus (worse) and requires that districts put a certain sort of plan in place for improvement.

On June 17 — after the district budget process, and after planning for the 2016-17 school year was well underway — the New York State Education Department announced it would award 18 School Improvement Grants (SIG grants) to priority schools, based on grant applications outlining improvement plans.

To qualify for a grant,

