

RCSD pays \$120K in severance to 2 ex-leaders

Payments

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The Rochester City School District is paying more than \$120,000 to two departed administrators — one a deputy superintendent, and one who left in a blaze of glory with biting criticism in a district newsletter. Christiana Otuwa was one of two deputy superintendents under Bolgen Vargas, earning \$165,000 in the 2016-17 school year. According to a separation agreement signed last November, she received six months of salary, about \$82,500, as well as a payout for an unspecified number of unused vacation days.

In return, she and the district both agreed not to publicly criticize the other, and Otuwa agreed not to sue the district. The agreement included no details of any grievances Otuwa or the district may have had.

Her separation payments would end if she were to have found another job in the meantime, and she emerged twice as a finalist: later in November in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and in the spring in Alachua County, Florida. She did not get either job.

The other administrator is Mayra Ortiz, who served as director of bilingual education for a salary of \$123,479 in 2016-17. The district's bilingual department issues a regular newsletter called *El Noticiero*.

On Feb. 10, Ortiz put out an issue with the title “English Only — The Slow Dismantling of Bilingual Education.”

In it, she complained that bilingual education (where both English and Spanish are used) was being subordinated to the English Language Learner department (including English as a Second Language, where English is the predominant means of instruction) under the new, flat administration model of Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams.

“The change in reporting structure has made us invisible, and representation at the table is mediocre at best and consistently misinforming,” she wrote, addressing other members of the bilingual department. “This backwards move is ill-informed and despite (Deane-Williams’) listening and learning tour, apparently you weren’t listened to, your voice was not heard.” She charged that the district had shifted resources from bilingual to English-only instruction, despite its successes. “I fully understand the consequences this newsletter will bring,” Ortiz concluded. “I am being targeted for being a whistleblower and the retaliation has not ceased, but at least I sleep well at night that I don’t go along to get along. I do what I am charged to do, and that is to stand for teachers and students.” Ortiz was correct in foreseeing the consequences. The same day she issued the newsletter, RCSD deputy general counsel Steven Carling wrote to her, calling it “misuse of district resources and insubordination.”

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Christiana Otuwa

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Ortiz was on leave at the time, Carling noted, and thus was not authorized to put the newsletter out. As a result, the district suspended her email account and access to the district computer network.

Abel Perez, director of English Language Learners and Languages Other Than English for the district, said Ortiz's newsletter was inaccurate in alleging that bilingual education is being dismantled.

"Contrary to the accusations, the district is committed to supporting and expanding bilingual programs," he wrote in an email.

Two weeks after the newsletter went out, Ortiz and the district signed a severance agreement paying her about four months' salary, approximately \$41,000, as well as \$7,600 in unused vacation time. As with Otuwa, neither side is allowed to discuss the matter and Ortiz waived her right to sue.

Neither the letter nor the separation agreement noted why Ortiz was on leave in February in the first place. The documents were released in response to a Freedom of Information request.

Otuwa was the RCSD cabinet member most closely invested in its work around restorative justice and the Community Task Force on School

Climate. Her replacement there is the new deputy superintendent, Kendra March.

“I had a close relationship with (Otuwa) and I understood what her vision was and what she stood for, and I haven’t had that opportunity with Dr. March yet,” said Ericka Simmons, president of the Parent Advisory Council.

“I don’t want to say (March) is standoff- ish, but I get the feeling she’s the type of person who really wants to understand a situation before she gets involved in it.”

The district said Friday that the school board is currently “considering how best to implement the new Code of Conduct developed by the Community Task Force.” It cited recent outreach efforts to the Latino community, including the hiring of Carlos Garcia in the communications department and its efforts to recruit teachers from Puerto Rico.

Last spring, three other leaders under Vargas received pay-outs of three months’ salary, plus vacation cash-outs, when they resigned.

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