

RCSD special education chief quits abruptly

Wood

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Rochester City School District special education chief Theresa Wood quit abruptly Monday after just two months on the job, saying: 'My integrity would not allow me to continue.'

RCSD hired Wood effective Dec. 1, luring her out of retirement from special education administration in the New York State Education Department. She took over for Sandy Simpson, who had been serving as interim director after Christopher Suriano left RCSD for the state's top special education job in 2016. Wood returned from a weeklong unpaid vacation on Monday, submitted her resignation and left. She pointed out she had been working for RCSD with no benefits, including vacation time. 'I absolutely loved working there and I'm quite upset I had to leave,' she said Wednesday afternoon. 'But ethically, morally, I just could not continue. ... I've been in special education for 37 years and my integrity would not allow me to continue.'

She would not elaborate on what she saw that troubled her, saying only: 'What concerned me were some decisions that were being made. ... I do have some grave concerns, and it's not necessarily all regarding

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special education.'

She also said she supports Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams and the administration.

'The district thanks Mrs. Wood for her work during her assignment. We understand the special education department faces serious challenges to meet the needs of our students,' the district said in a statement. 'The superintendent has identified special education as a top priority, assigning additional staff and resources to help ensure schools and students receive the support they need.'

Wood served a three-month stint as interim special education chief after Suriano left, and before that had spent 12 years working for the state education department. Her departure continues the lack of special education leadership at a time when that department's shortcomings threaten to swamp RCSD's broader improvement plans.

A botched change in duties related to required meetings for students with disabilities has drawn the ire of both teachers and administrators and interfered with students' ability to receive the services to which they're entitled. There are not enough people with the proper qualifications and training to do all the work needed for students with disabilities.

In January, Deane-Williams commissioned former School of the Arts Principal Brenda Pacheco to serve as a 'special assistant' on the topic. The school board recently created its own public commission to study the problem and make recommendations.

Special education has been inadequate in RCSD for generations, but longtime observers say it is worse now than ever.

A consultant report last spring called student performance 'dismal,' and said the district's organization and practices were to blame.

One recommendation was for the district to stop classifying students unnecessarily. Nevertheless, enrollment projections released last month predict that within 10 years, one in four students in the district will have a disability.

The Empire Justice Center, which sued the district once before and helped supervise a decadeslong consent decree, has threatened to do the same again.

The district received comparatively good news Wednesday, though, when the state announced graduation rates for students with disabilities increased significantly, from 27.6 percent to 33.7. That is the worst among New York's Big 5 urban school districts but is a jump from 18.7 percent in 2012.

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