

Leaders clash on school violence

Union wants board to remove Vargas now

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Rochester teachers will protest problems with school safety and special education at Thursday's school board meeting, the product of both difficult conditions in schools and a worsening relationship between the Rochester Teachers Union and district administration.

Though teachers will address the school board, RTA President Adam Urbanski made clear the real target is outgoing Superintendent Bolgen Vargas, whom he accused of slackening his efforts in advance of his Dec. 31 departure.

"It is very frustrating the superintendent who is here ... is not doing very much to address the situation, and the (interim) superintendent who will be here in January isn't here yet," Urbanski said. "I'm quite frankly both surprised and disappointed that (Vargas) has slowed down his work — I assume because he won't be here in a month and a half."

Because of that position, the RTA is asking the school board to remove Vargas immediately rather than waiting for the end of December.

Vargas vigorously rejected the notion that his effort has fallen off and said it is systemic intransigence, especially on the part of the administrators union, that prevents him — and will prevent his successors — from redirecting dollars toward trouble spots, particularly around the issues of student behavior and social-emotional support.

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Rochester schools Superintendent Bolgen Vargas' scheduled departure is Dec. 31.

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"The issue of student discipline has been a challenge facing this community for 30 years," he said. "To suggest the solution is for me to leave today instead of six weeks from now saddens me." The teachers' first concern is an increase in violence in schools. The union reports that assaults on teachers have risen precipitously, in part as a result of changes in discipline policies. According to Urbanski, there have been 43 assaults on teachers this year compared to 18 through November last year. District records only confirm 38 assault claims by teachers this year, and Vargas noted that "one assault is too many." The teachers say Edison High School in particular has been very unruly. "It has been disorderly; it has been violent," said veteran Edison global studies teacher Rick Amico. "It's a challenge for teachers to teach in this environment." With the urging and support of social justice and philanthropic organizations, the district has placed a special emphasis on changing the way it deals with student misbehavior. Suspensions are way down from 2014-15 as teachers and administrators are encouraged to deal with problems in less punitive ways. More than a dozen schools, for instance, have received training in restorative justice practices in which students are helped in talking through conflict themselves.

The union says the lessened allowance for suspensions has not been well complemented with other types of additional support, such as social workers and psychologists.

Vargas pointed to the increase in social workers in the 2015-16 budget — every school has at least one, which remarkably was not already the case — and said the only way to add more support to handle behavioral issues is to make it a spending priority.

"If a child has serious mental health needs, how does a suspension help? Or how is keeping that child in a school setting help?" he asked. "We're going to need to continue to shift dollars away from central office to meet the needs of our students, and we've been doing that."

The second main complaint has to do with the implementation of a new style of special education. The district has long used integrated co-teach (ICOT) classrooms, where a general education and special education teacher are both available to all students. That model is not considered the best practice, so the district this year has mostly switched to a consultant teacher model, where students with disabilities receive more tailored support. The change was part of a corrective plan that required state approval. It was widely agreed upon that the success of the new model would hinge on scheduling — whether teachers would have enough time with their students as well as enough planning time among themselves. According to the union, the scheduling has been botched. Ninety percent of the teachers it surveyed said they have had no common planning time to implement the new method. "General ed teachers are not sure what they're supposed to be doing, and consultant teachers are overwhelmed by the amount of students they're supposed to serve," said Gail Rizzo, a special education teacher at School 16 and the RTA's special education chairwoman. "ICOT was not the golden age of special education, but it's better than what we have now."

Vargas and special education chief Chris Suriano pointed to data showing that students do better in the consultant teacher model. They also said it has been "incredibly challenging" to get teachers to take professional development seminars that could smooth the transition.

Both the student safety and special education issues are playing out against the backdrop of stalled contract negotiations with both the RTA and the Association of Administrators and Supervisors of Rochester. Vargas implied the unions' inflexible negotiating positions are the main impediment to some of the very changes they're calling for. "We never would have been allowed to do pretty much anything unless we were constantly (acting unilaterally)," Vargas said. "And then they say, 'You didn't do it the right way.' No — you didn't want to sit at the table with me to do it the right way, because you're vested in the status quo."

The resolution that the RTA's governance council voted on Tuesday stated that "the climate for teaching and learning is rapidly deteriorating during this period of transition and leadership vacuum" and called on the board to transition immediately to Daniel Lowengard, the former Syracuse superintendent who will take over for Vargas at the beginning of 2016.

The resolution lays out concerns with contract negotiations and violence in schools and concludes: "The district has been unresponsive and continues to neglect the safety and the academic needs of our students ... and we cannot afford to wait until more learning time is lost and more teachers and students are hurt." The resolution almost certainly will not lead to an earlier departure for Vargas; school board President Van White said Tuesday that Vargas is definitely staying until Dec. 31. Vargas announced his resignation last month after it became apparent that the school board would not renew his contract when it expires June 30, 2016. From January to June, he will serve as an adviser to Lowengard and continue to earn his current salary.

Thursday's board meeting begins at 6:30 p.m. at the district office, 131 W. Broad St.

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