

## Regents OK closing city charter school

### Closing

**JUSTIN MURPHY** @CITIZENMURPHY

The New York State Board of Regents Monday voted unanimously to close Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School at the end of this school year, determining it had failed to provide a decent education to its 240 high school students.

It is the first Rochester-area charter school to be closed since 2005, when two for-profit schools were denied renewal.

In its recommendation to the board, the state education department said the school “is still far from meeting the requirements” of state charter school law. It also pointed to “irregularities” in the graduation data reported by the school.

RCMCS had its first senior class in 2016. Its official graduation rate was 71 percent, significantly higher than the Rochester City School District. Among the 42 graduates, however, about a third received a local rather than Regents diploma. Only five schools in New York issued a greater proportion of local diplomas.

Local diplomas are awarded only in very specific circumstances, most prominently for students with disabilities. The state said it is “reviewing” eight cases where the school classified students with a disability in the winter or spring of their 12th-grade year, making them eligible for a local diploma when they otherwise would not have been.

In a written response to the state, RCMCS Board of Trustees President Kevin McCormick “vehemently denie(d)” that and other allegations.

School founder and CEO Dennis Francione, a former RCSD principal, did not respond to a request for comment; a reporter standing outside the school at

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**Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School, on Hart Street, will close after this school year.**

SHAWN DOWD/@SDOWDPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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dismissal time was asked to leave the property.

The school was founded in 2012 with the intention of giving students a rigorous career-oriented education featuring close partnerships with local businesses.

### **Several problems for school**

Perhaps the biggest problem was teacher turnover. In its first four years, it never had more than 40 percent of its teachers remain from one year to the next. The only teacher who has remained since the school opened is Mc-Cormick's daughter.

The school has also gone through seven instructional leaders in its five years. One, Dan McFarlane, started the 2012-13 year as a substitute teacher and ended it as the principal, less than 12 months after receiving his initial certification as a classroom teacher.

Student retention was a problem as well; nearly a third of the students who first enrolled at RCMCS in 2012 had left by 2016.

Several students walking out Monday afternoon were surprised to learn from a reporter the school had been ordered closed earlier in the day.

“I like (RCMCS) because it’s small,” 11th-grader Chastity Willis said. “There were a lot of fights early in the year because there were gang members and stuff, but once they got rid of them, it’s been better.”

A number of current and former employees and board members raised concerns over the last five years about the way the school was being run, either in letters to the board of trustees or through official state complaints.

The founding board president, Jeannine Dingus-Eason, resigned in 2014 amid growing acrimony with Francione. She reported to the board that instruction was poor or nonexistent, morale was low and grades were being inflated. “I haven’t been there since (I left), but it was a disaster and he’s at the core of it,” she said. “I feel bad for the families that were let down. It could have been so great.”

Francione faces a lawsuit in federal court from his former business officer, Jennifer Bulling, alleging sexual harassment and unfair termination.

The school also recently received a biting audit from the state comptroller’s office, showing it did not have a functional procurement policy and had failed to bid on a number of contracts totaling \$1.3 million.

RCMCS students will need to enroll in other schools, whether in the city school district or other charter schools, for the 2017-18 school year.

[JMURPHY7@Gannett.com](mailto:JMURPHY7@Gannett.com)



**School founder and CEO Dennis Francione, a former principal for the city school district, is facing a lawsuit from his former business officer.**