

## Trump's plans for Rochester schools vague

### Would school vouchers be accepted everywhere?

At the Rochester school board's January organizational meeting, we heard the usual inspirational quotes from Helen Keller and Maya Angelou. President Van White rolled out a new "3 Cs," slogan that encouraged district employees to be Courageous! Collaborative! And Creative! And then board Vice President Cynthia Elliott got real. "We don't know what this year is going to bring," she said, referencing the upcoming inauguration of Donald Trump. "We don't have a clue." As new Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams prepares to roll out plans for improving New York's worst performing district, President-elect Trump has promised to help students escape it altogether.

His education proposals didn't get as much attention as his Twitter feed, but Trump has repeatedly vowed to provide \$12,000 in annual "school choice" funds for every American student who is living in poverty. The federal government would spend \$20 billion on these vouchers and ask states to kick in funding as well.

"I want every single inner city child in America who is today trapped in a failing school to have the freedom — the civil right — to attend the school of their choice," Trump said at a speech at an Ohio charter school last year. "This includes private schools, traditional public schools, magnet schools and charter schools."

Does that mean that a kid from Rochester could take his \$12,000 voucher and sign up for classes at Pittsford Sutherland High School? In the past, federally mandated "school choice" has been an Orwellian farce. Students in Rochester are allowed to choose among a wide selection of low-performing schools within their district's limits, and the vast majority of city parents choose schools other than the one in their neighborhood. "Competition" between these schools didn't cause improvement. As a result, some students ride the bus for an hour to get to schools where less than 5 percent of students pass their state math and literacy tests.

Would all schools be required to accept vouchers from any student under Trump's plan? Could New York, which is not one of 13 states that currently uses an education voucher program, decline to participate? Would the Rochester School District's \$70 million in annual federal aid be in jeopardy if it didn't?

Details on Trump's vision aren't specific. But his selection to head the federal Department of Education has supported unlimited expansion of charter schools in Michigan and voucher programs. And Vice President-elect Mike Pence expanded a voucher program that spends \$135 million a year to send children to private schools in Indiana. It seems clear that the president-elect is more interested in funneling money and students away from failing public schools than in fixing them. A spokesman for the Rochester School District declined to comment about the voucher proposal on Friday. Next Thursday, Deanne-Williams will present the results of a "100 day listening, learning" endeavor. Many people await her vision for improvement during a time of uncertainty.

As Commissioner Elliott put it, we don't know what this year is going to bring. We don't have a clue.

*Erica Bryant is the Pay It Forward columnist. Contact her at [ebryant@gannett.com](mailto:ebryant@gannett.com).*



ERICA BRYANT

COLUMNIST

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