

Vargas leaves mark as schools chief

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Outgoing Rochester School District Superintendent Bolgen Vargas likely will be remembered for his expansion of city children's learning opportunities and the conflict with the elected school board that led to his resignation this week.

His tenure officially ends Dec. 31, when he will be replaced on an interim basis by former Syracuse City School District Superintendent Daniel Lowengard.

Vargas, however, garnered praise — and criticism — on many points. In particular, he was criticized for his unwillingness to confront New York's top education officials over matters of standards, curriculum and testing, though his position to do so was weakened by the state's financial levers.

Many of his top priorities had to do with confronting the burden of poverty that many Rochester children carry. He continuously called on other community agencies to join that fight, particularly when it came to early childhood educa

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tion and literacy.

His attempts at working across municipal lines, either with the city of Rochester or suburban school districts, were by turns well-received, controversial and unpopular.

Here is a closer look at each of those topics.

State education policy, testing and the Common Core

Like the other large urban districts in New York, Rochester depends on state funding for the bulk of its budget, and is also in a vulnerable position due to its large number of schools on various sanctions lists. The last two years, for instance, Vargas trekked to Albany during budget season to make his case for additional millions of state dollars to fund his priorities, coming away with chunks of extra money in each instance.

For that reason, Vargas had more to lose by angering Albany education officials than suburban superintendents whose budgets are mostly funded by local property tax revenue, and he generally refrained from criticizing the educational regime in New York as his colleagues often did.

"They basically tell you, either you get your performance up in a year or two — which is completely impossible — or they'll close the school down," said Bill Cala, the former Fairport superintendent and Rochester interim superintendent. "That's an enormous amount of pressure." For instance, when the other 18 Monroe County superintendents co-wrote a letter to Gov. Andrew Cuomo complaining about the state funding mechanism and "flawed accountability system," among other things, Vargas opted against signing it. This spring, when New York was the national locus of discontent with mandated testing of young children, and Monroe County one of its most rebellious counties, the Rochester School District was an outlier. About 20 percent of city students refused to take the state math exam for grades 3-8. That is on par with the statewide number but a lower rate than any of the suburban schools, some of which had fewer than half their students sit for the test.

Among the state's other large urban districts, however, Rochester stood out in the opposite sense. It had far more students refuse

the tests than Buffalo, Syracuse, Yonkers or New York City. Vargas was insistent on city students taking the tests — one of his top deputies was criticized for asking principals to tell her the names of teachers who had publicly advocated for opting out so she could “follow up with them.” When the results came out months later, he attributed the district’s poor results in part to the fact that opt-out rates had been highest at some of the most successful schools. His position earned him jeers from opt-out supporters, including some school board members, the Rochester Teachers Association and Cala. “From everything I observed, he was parroting the reformers’ rhetoric,” Cala said. “He never really gave any scrutiny whatsoever to the validity of these things.”

Poverty

The consequences of students living in poverty have a major impact on the responsibilities of any urban superintendent, and Vargas was no different. Many of his top initiatives were aimed at mitigating its effects.

“Poverty presents terrible challenges, but it cannot be an excuse,” he wrote in an action plan for the district. “Rochester students are as smart and talented as students anywhere in the world, with just as much potential. We must use the district’s resources to mitigate poverty, giving our students the time and support they need to succeed.” During his four-year tenure, the amount of time city students spent at school increased dramatically, as did the scope of their activities there. Many schools went for longer school days, and enrollment in summer school — not just for remediation, but for enrichment — was boosted.

Besides classwork, there has been more music, more art and more sports. Vargas is fond of saying that poor children in the city should have more, not fewer, opportunities for extracurriculars and enrichment through school, compared to suburban districts. There also is at least one social worker in each school, which was not the case before.

Similarly, Vargas’ emphasis on early literacy aligned with the priorities of other Rochester groups working on poverty. Research and common sense both indicate that money spent preparing children to learn early — including in prekindergarten, which has expanded to 3year-olds — will lead them to more success later.

“He brought a lot of attention to the challenges of educating students living in poverty,” said Jennifer Pyle, deputy director of the Conference of Big Five School Districts.

At the same time, plenty of obstacles still stand between poor children and an education, including some on which the district could have some influence.

There are still not enough social workers to properly handle students’ needs, as the University of Rochester pointed out when it took over East High School. And the district has faced criticism for its inability to communicate with parents, particularly those who do not speak English. It was only this year that the district seriously overhauled Edison Tech, the high school most dedicated to placing students in good-paying jobs that can left them and their families from poverty.

Working with others

Vargas had a mixed record in reaching across municipal and governmental lines, both with city government and suburban school districts.

His relationship with Mayor Lovely Warren was not particularly close, but they were able to collaborate on some important initiatives, including an expansion of prekindergarten, wide distribution of free books for students and the justlaunched Beacon Schools concept, meant to provide more wraparound services based at school. The two sides are also pushing forward a massive school renovation project. Their most prominent clash came on the subject of busing. When fighting among bus-riding students became a problem at the Rochester Transit Center, Warren laid the blame at Vargas’ feet and called on the district to change its busing policies to keep more students away from downtown.

On another note, the district’s ties with its suburban counterparts have grown tighter in the last year, for better or worse.

In a wave of interest in the Urban-Suburban program, five new districts signed on, raising the number to 12. The hundreds of students who participate in that program benefit from their new surroundings, but deprive the city district of some of its best minds.

While Vargas has noted the attrition, he has declined to criticize the program or its participants, saying parents should choose the best path for their children. Soon, however, that tide of children will begin to flow in the opposite direction. Thanks to a state grant and mounting suburban interest, students from schools throughout the county will be able to attend select city schools beginning next year. The centerpiece of that program will likely be Edison Tech, though details have yet to be finalized.

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