

Vargas still on district payroll

Vargas

Ex-superintendent 'available' but idle

JUSTIN MURPHY

@CITIZENMURPHY

When embattled Rochester City School District Superintendent Bolgen Vargas officially resigned Dec. 31, he still had six months on his four-year contract.

The school board could have negotiated a buyout for that remaining time; it also could have kept him in place as a lame duck before choosing a permanent replacement to begin this summer.

Instead, Vargas and School Board President Van White announced that Vargas would stay on as an informal adviser while continuing to receive benefits and collect \$97,500 in salary. The plan was for him to serve as a consultant for interim Superintendent Dan Lowengard.

"I'm available to do whatever he asks me; however I can be of help to

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him or the board," Vargas said then. White said the arrangement was in the interests of "consistency and stability," particularly during the budget process.

Things have not gone according to plan. First, Lowengard sustained a stroke less than a week into his tenure and was replaced by his chief of staff, Linda Cimusz.

And while Vargas worked closely with Lowengard in the last two months of 2015, when he was still officially superintendent, he appears to have done little in his advisory role. In response to a Freedom of Information Law request for Vargas' schedule, work products, meeting notes or other accounting of how he spent his time, the district wrote: "Your request is denied because these records do not exist."

Spokesman Chip Partner pointed to the text of Vargas' separation agreement, which required only that Vargas "be available on a reasonable basis ... to consult with the Board of Education President and/or any individual appointed by the Board of Education as Superintendent, Acting Superintendent or Interim Superintendent."

"I don't believe Ms. Cimusz has found it necessary or had time to meet with Dr. Vargas, given the abrupt way in which she became Interim Superintendent," Partner wrote. According to Partner, Vargas has occasionally responded to questions where institutional memory was needed — for instance, the rationale behind past decisions — but otherwise has just been "available."

Vargas declined to be interviewed regarding his work in 2016 when asked by the Democrat and Chronicle on Tuesday.

His inactivity is likely due in part to Lowengard's unexpected departure. When asked at the end of December how he planned to use Vargas, Lowengard said the former superintendent would continue to be active in his prized attendance and early literacy initiatives. Before he left, Vargas created a lengthy transition document for Lowengard's benefit. The unplanned second transition from Lowengard to Cimusz, however, inevitably led to some central office scrambling, and Vargas apparently never connected with his second interim replacement.

Partner could not say whether Vargas and Cimusz have spoken directly even once since she began in mid-January.

Even if Lowengard had remained, it is not clear that Vargas would have done significantly more. After all, if the board had wanted him playing an active role in the district's affairs, it could have chosen to let him finish out his term as superintendent. "The agreement called for Dr V(argas) to be available to the interim super. If he was not utilized in that fashion, I imagine there must be a good reason for that," said Board President Van White Wednesday. The school board has chosen its next superintendent but has not announced the name publicly as it negotiates a contract. The announcement is expected to come early next week.

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