

New superintendent has deep RCSD roots

Myers-Small worked as high school counselor

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Jacob Scott first met Lesli Myers-Small as a student at the University of Rochester, when she came to present at one of his classes. That day, he said, was the first time he seriously thought of becoming a counselor like her and returning to Edison Tech High School, his alma mater.

She was a UR graduate as well, and the two of them continued to talk over the years, exchanging updates and encouragement.

“Everywhere she’s been, she’s just kept in touch,” Scott said. “I wasn’t working for her; she wasn’t working for me. Just, genuinely building a relationship.”

By November 2019, Scott was principal at Edison Tech, and he was dealing with a tragedy. A 16-year-old student collapsed and died in the gymnasium. He was busy attending to traumatized students and staff when a van pulled up outside the school.

Inside it were tray upon tray of freshbaked oatmeal cookies, made by Myers-Small and delivered for the Edison Tech staff as an unsolicited offering of support.

“She just wanted to do something for us,” Scott said. “And let me tell you, they were good.”

Context from working in district

Myers-Small begins her tenure as RCSD superintendent with an advantage — and a challenge — that no district leader has faced in a generation. With the possible exception of Bolgen Vargas, who had served for many years on the school board before becoming superintendent, Myers-Small enters the job with more experience in Rochester than any leader since Manny Rivera.

“If you think about all the gaps RSCD has in creating a more viable school experience for kids, she’s played a role in trying to transform many of those spaces,” East High School Superintendent Shaun Nelms said. He worked with Myers-Small when both were administrators in Greece.

“I think the greatest asset Lesli has, based on her recent experience in NYSED, is that she was in our schools monitoring academic progress,” he said. “Lesli has actually walked our halls and she has the context of what the learning is and what it can become.”

‘She gets a head start’

City Council member Malik Evans first knew the new superintendent as Ms. Myers — he was a student at Wilson Magnet High School when she was there as a counselor.

“Lesli had the reputation of, even if she wasn’t someone’s counselor at Wilson, she took them on anyway,” Evans said. “Students respected her; people would go to her for advice.”

Like Scott, Evans kept in touch with Myers-Small over the years even though their paths never formally crossed. He said he brought her name up several times when he was on the school board as the district was looking for a new superintendent.

“I think she gets a head start from what other superintendents have had,” he said. “When you say something or a name, she’ll have the context for it in terms of what folks were thinking about when certain decisions were made.”

At the same time, personal connections can become tripwires when difficult decisions need to be made. Dade’s lack of history with Rochester was seen as a positive when it became clear he would need to make massive budget cuts.

“It could be that perhaps people will try to leverage their friendships to try to push policy changes,” Nelms said. “I think having people

Terry Dade, Jean-Claude Brizard and Clifford Janey were all recruited from out of town. Barbara Deane-Williams was a familiar face in the region but spent most of her career in smaller districts west of Rochester.

And while Vargas knew many people from his service on the school board, his actual career in education had been in Greece, not RCSD.

Myers-Small, meanwhile, began her career as a counselor at Wilson Magnet and John Marshall high schools, working in the city from 1993 to 2002.

“It’s not just the relationships, but the fact I worked in the district and have that context,” she said. “Having that background and history helps me and has given some of my colleagues some comfort, that I’ve been here.”

More recently, her work as an associate commissioner in the state Education Department involved hands-on oversight of more than a dozen RCSD schools.

She also has served on several regional and statewide committees and organizations related to racial equity in education, including as co-chair of the Urban-Suburban program.

understand boundaries ... is something she’s going to have to work through.”

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Myers-Small