

## State finalizes closure of Urban Choice Charter School

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

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The state Board of Regents last week voted unanimously not to renew the charter for Rochester's Urban Choice Charter School, apparently concluding an unusually vitriolic process and denying the 18-year-old charter school a second narrow escape from closure.

The 400-student school has vowed to appeal the decision via a lawsuit but is barred by state law from doing so. It likely will instead argue that the renewal process was flawed.

As always with a school closure, the current students will need to find a new school for next year, and the application process for RCSD and other charter schools has already closed.

The Board of Regents vote took place without discussion and follows the recommendation of the state Department of Education, which concluded earlier this spring that student achievement at the K-8 school on the city's west side did not warrant another charter extension. That recommendation was based on performance data as well as two recent visits to the school: a regularly scheduled one in November and an unannounced one in January.

Lisa Long, executive director of the NYSED charter school office, made the January visit personally. The report from her and another observer, David Frank, was alarming.

They saw "little evidence of academic rigor" as well as "many adults in the building and in classrooms with no apparent purpose or function," according to their report. Students were doing work well below grade level, they said, and teachers were not following the stated school schedule.

"Although school leadership stated that the school was 'five months into a three-year turnaround plan,' despite the school being in its 18th year of operation, little evidence of academic impact could be observed," they wrote. "We left Urban Choice with ... serious concerns that the school has the capacity, will, or skill to best serve its students and meet the standards for renewal."

In a heated response, Urban Choice CEO Lynn McCarthy said the January site visit report was filled with "misinformation" and was "almost entirely contradicted" by the account of the principal, former RCSD school chief Amy Schiavi.

The below grade-level work was for review purposes, she said, and employees' roles would have been clear if Long or Frank had asked.

McCarthy also reported that Frank scolded the school for the non-academic supports it offered students and families, saying it is "not a social services agency" and needed to focus more on academics.

"One can only deduce that the purpose of your visit and letter is ... to pave the way for a non-renewal recommendation to the Board of Regents," McCarthy wrote.

Long responded in turn, saying Mc-Carthy's "perceptions of what was occurring" did not explain "the school's consistent and long standing poor academic performance." The Board of Regents voted April 17 not to renew the charter, meaning the school will not be able to open in the fall.

Rochester-area Regent Wade Norwood was among those to vote against renewing the charter. He did not respond to a request for comment. The other local Regent, Adrian Hale, is not a voting member of the committee that made the decision.

Board chairman Mubarak Bashir said the school plans to challenge the decision, but he would not provide more detail about the plan. State law is clear that a charter renewal denial “is final and shall not be reviewable in any court or by any administrative body.” In its paperwork, the school noted that the site visits and subsequent reports were not done according to the required timeline, an error that could become the basis for a legal challenge.

The charter school, one of the oldest in the city, has been in a precarious position since February 2020, when the state first recommended that it be shut down.

COVID-19 arrived the following month, and with it a reprieve for Urban Choice in the interest of minimizing disruptions. The school got two short-term renewals, with conditions. One condition was that it hire an outside consultant to help with day-to-day operations.

According to Urban Choice, the state directed it to hire a company called the Center for Educational Innovation.

“Unfortunately,” school officials wrote to the state in March, “CEI was terrible.”

The two parties had an acrimonious split in February 2022 and Urban Choice is now working with another consultant, former RCSD Deputy Superintendent Beth Mascitti-Miller. CEI Executive Director Michael Kohlhausen did not respond to a request for comment.

Amid the voluminous documentation that Urban Choice sent to the state were hundreds of letters from current and former students and parents attesting to the disruption that will cause.

“To change my son’s school or staff members and the children he is used to will be a disservice not only to the staff but to my child (he matters) and all the hard work he and the teachers have put in,” one parent wrote.

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**Urban Choice Charter School on Maple Street in Rochester.** JUSTIN MURPHY/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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