



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Commissioner of Education
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March 8, 2019

Mr. Van Henri White, President
Board of Education
Rochester City School District
131 West Broad Street
Rochester, NY 14614

RE: Response to Distinguished Educator Report

Dear Mr. White:

In August 2018, in accordance with Education Law §§211-b and 211-c and Commissioner's Regulations §§100.16 and 100.17, Dr. Jaime Aquino was appointed as Distinguished Educator (DE) to support the Rochester City School District (RCSD or "the District") in improving its systems, structures, and operations and addressing persistent, significant gaps in student services and academic performance.

In November 2018, Dr. Aquino submitted a report to the New York State Education Department (NYSED or "the Department") to which you were asked to provide a response. In February 2019, the District submitted its action plan ("Plan") in response to the recommendations contained in Dr. Aquino's report.

After review of the RCSD Plan, I want to share some general concerns with regard to the inadequacy of the District's response. This correspondence will be followed by a more detailed response to the District's Plan.

- Although the Plan includes a reaction to each recommendation in Dr. Aquino's report, it does not include an overarching, coherent vision for District improvement nor a delineation of the priorities for the District's path forward. The responses often do not fully address the relevant recommendation, lack specificity, and/or appear unrealistic in terms of either timelines and/or current District capacity to implement the action effectively. Overall, the timelines appear aspirational, especially given that the District's leadership is in transition. While some of the actions may lead to improvement in specific areas, the plan lacks the cohesiveness needed to drive systemwide increases in effectiveness and efficiency.
- The District should identify specific action steps to ensure that the RCSD Board of Education ("Board") has a clear understanding of its role; for example, by ensuring that District leadership has autonomy to meet goals for improving student achievement and to effectively manage day-to-day operations.

- Accountability criteria and measures are lacking throughout the plan, as well as a commitment using data to establish goals and inform practices. Specific examples of areas requiring more detail include how RCSD will:
 - Ensure special education students are getting appropriate resources, services, and academic supports;
 - Assess and monitor cultural responsiveness in curricula and lesson plans;
 - Implement a uniform system to determine the effectiveness of Response to Intervention programs;
 - Develop and ensure implementation of the Master Plan for education for English language learners;
 - Measure the effectiveness of professional development to prepare teachers to meet the needs for all learners; and
 - Use data on school climate survey indicators, chronic absenteeism, and suspension to monitor improvement in school climate.

- RCSD's ability to drive change and promote student success requires engaging with and being responsive to both internal and external stakeholders. For example, the District should:
 - Plan for regular updates to the Board of Education and public regarding the District's progress;
 - Ensure that information is available to parents/guardians in a language they understand;
 - Engage with school leaders to determine how the District can best provide comprehensive – rather than disjointed – supports; and
 - Create a rigorous and transparent process that links finances to priorities and allocates resources accordingly.

The District should begin to revisit the Plan based on the information provided above. Once the Department provides its full response, the District will be given six weeks to work with Dr. Aquino to revise and resubmit its plan.

I look forward to our continued partnership to improve educational outcomes for students in the Rochester City School District.

Sincerely,



MaryEllen Elia
Commissioner

c: Rochester City School District Board of Education
Daniel G. Lowengard
Jaime Aquino
Jhone Ebert
Angélica Infante-Green
Ira Schwartz
Kim Wilkins