

Key city principal denied tenure

Principal

Board makes decision in executive session

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester school board last week declined to grant tenure to the well-regarded principal heading one of its most high-profile turnaround projects, overriding the district's recommendation and infuriating the substantial coalition she has assembled around the school.

Caterina Leone-Mannino took over as principal at Enrico Fermi School 17 in the JOSANA neighborhood in 2015, just months after New York state labeled it "failing" and placed it in receivership. In doing so, she voluntarily left a high-level central office job and the tenure that came with it.

In the three years since then, the school, and in particular Leone-Mannino's leadership of it, have repeatedly been held up as models for

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change in the district. The school has been labeled a "Beacon School," collaborating closely with the city of Rochester and many outside agencies to build a robust network of resources for the school and neighborhood.

"There is no principal I know of that has more connection with their community than Caterina," said Ralph Spezio, the school's longtime former principal. "Every single level and layer of that (neighborhood) loves her."

The school, while still struggling academically, was deemed by the state to have made positive progress in 2016-17, and Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams recommended that Leone-Mannino receive tenure.

Nonetheless, when the board was asked last week to approve the administration's recommendation of tenure — normally a rubber stamp — it retreated into executive session, pulled her name from the resolution and ultimately voted instead to give her a one-year probationary extension.

Board President Van White declined to comment on the reasoning because it would violate the confidentiality of executive session. The board actions unfolded in a way that conceals who supported Leone-Mannino's tenure and who did not. Board member Liz Hallmark, who serves as liaison to School 17, called her "a brilliant instructional leader" and said she fully supports her.

Leone-Mannino herself declined to comment.

The unexpected decision has created a furor among both the school community and the principals union. Its president, Tim Cliby, said he has never seen the school board reject the superintendent's recommendation for

tenure.

“It makes absolutely no sense to any of us watching,” Cliby said. “I don’t think I’ve seen a principal have her entire faculty and staff behind them like she does.”

Cliby and others could only guess at political motives. He believes the board is sending a message of no confidence to Deane-Williams; Luis Aponte, chairman of the neighborhood group Charles House Neighbors in Action, wondered if Leone-Mannino is being punished for a perceived cozy relationship with the state Education Department.

“Caterina has been a humongous asset to us in terms of parental and community engagement,” he said. “My personal opinion, I don’t know if it’s vindictive or something.”

State English exam scores rose last year at the school, and suspensions and truancy have fallen. The children still failed to meet state progress markers for math and science tests, though, and the school remains in receivership.

Before arriving at School 17, Leone-Mannino rose from teaching to several prominent central office roles, leading the district’s expanded learning time effort and then its office of innovation.

Her first order of business in 2015 was to restore the school’s relationships with neighborhood partners and to bring down the sky-high student suspension rate. Her focus on school climate is in alignment with a developing district priority of handling student trauma and toxic stress with greater sensitivity.

“If you talk to anyone about the feel of the building, it’s like night and day from what it used to be,” said Spero Michailidis, who works full time at the school’s student help zone through a contract with the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence. “She’s always there for the kids. Even when I’m at my wit’s end, I can watch her interact with kids and walk away feeling inspired.”

As a fluent Spanish speaker, Leone-Mannino has brought non-English-speaking parents into the fold in a way that most school leaders cannot. More than half her students are Latinos, one of the highest percentages in any district school.

The “Beacon School” label has great significance in Lovely Warren’s educational agenda for the city, leading Leone-Mannino to develop an unusually close working relationship with the mayor.

In a statement, Warren called Leone-Mannino a “hard-working, conscientious and diligent educator who cares deeply about the School 17 community.

“I am not aware of the reasoning used to deny her tenure, but from my perspective she deserved to be granted tenure based on the work she has done and continues to do at this important school,” Warren wrote.

At a time when the district is rolling out its Path Forward plan and gearing up for a challenging budget season, Leone-Mannino’s ordeal is the second self-created distraction.

Last week, a school chief apparently told staff at Lincoln Park School 44 in the 19th Ward that it was slated to close, even though that hasn’t been decided yet. That prompted a fiery response from outgoing board member Mary Adams, and a protest at the following meeting.

Several of Leone-Mannino’s supporters said they intend to demonstrate at this month’s school board meeting, asking the board members — two of whom were just sworn in, and did not vote on the original denial — to reconsider.

“People underestimate this community,” Spezio said. “They love Caterina, and they are incensed. ... The next board meeting, you’re going to see pitchforks and torches. That boardroom is not large enough to hold what that community will turn out.”

JMURPHY7@Gannett.com



Caterina Leone-Mannino with student Jada Chelsea Bernard at School 17 in April 2017. SHAWN DOWD/@SDOWDPHOTO/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER