

Justin Murphy

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School

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Three teachers at James P.B. Duffy School 12 marked Trevyan Rowe present at school on the day he wandered away from his school bus and drowned in the Genesee River, and at least one also went back the following day and attempted to cover it up by changing the record retroactively to “absent,” part of a host of what Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams called “the very obvious human errors that resulted in this (tragedy).”

Deane-Williams and Rochester School Board President Van White on Thursday outlined a litany of failures on the school district’s part concerning the 14-year-old’s disappearance and death and said they hope to engage the state Education Department to review ev-

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everything that happened.

“We are here for one reason and one reason only,” White said. “That is to take full and complete responsibility for this young man’s passing.”

White and fellow board member Beatriz LeBron met earlier in the day with Trevyan’s mother, Carrie Houston, and apologized to her.

“We were able to look at her, eye-to-eye and faceto-face, and tell her we were wrong,” White said. “And she seemed to appreciate that.”

The district also shared additional details about Trevyan’s special education classification Tuesday. He was classified as having a learning disability, not autism, and was in a self-contained class with 15 students and one teacher.

He did not have any transportation accommodations, meaning he rode a regular yellow bus like most students do, and he was not recorded as a student with a history of wandering or eloping.

It is not clear whether those facts about his classification point to errors by the district, which has a long history of misclassifying students.

The mis-recorded attendance explains why the 14year-old boy’s mother never received an automated phone call from the school district to notify her that he was absent. Instead, she found out he was missing after he didn’t return home as usual in the evening.

Deane-Williams also conceded that Trevyan was not observed leaving school grounds by any of the five staffers who are posted outside to greet students, and she said there are “no excuses” for the district not realizing a student was absent until the end of the school day.

She said she has asked the school board to fund hiring an attendance clerk for each district school “so parents can be notified in a timely manner and personally concerning student absences.” That could include eliminating automated phone calls altogether, she said.

“What we know is our system failed us,” Deane-Williams said.

In practice, the automated phone call likely would not have saved Trevyan’s life. It would have gone out hours after several motorists reported seeing someone matching his description on the Susan B. Anthony-Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge over the Genesee River.

The larger question, though, is why Trevyan, who had autism, was able to elude not only the adults on the sidewalk outside the school, but the systems designed to keep children like him safe. Attendance is the first and most basic such system: Is the student here, or is he not?

Problem previously reported

A 2012 *Democrat and Chronicle* investigation showed that RCSD’s record-keeping software was reporting children as “present” unless the teacher proactively changed it to absent.

That led to improbable attendance rates above 99 percent at some of the district’s lowest-performing schools.

Bolgen Vargas, the superintendent at the time, vowed to change that system and put a renewed emphasis on attendance, resulting in incremental improvements at many schools. The current data, by all accounts, is more trustworthy; schools with the best reputations are shown to have high attendance, while those with worse reputations are shown to have poor attendance.

There is no evidence of a mass reversion to bad record-keeping at School 12 or any other school, and district officials said the policy and practice are still to record “absent” as the default.

The teachers who marked Trevyan present were for “special classes” such as physical education, music or art, but were not identified by name or title. His special education teacher did correctly record him as absent, Deane-Williams said.

Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski declined to comment about the three teachers, who are on administrative leave, but said he agreed there should be an independent investigation of what happened.

“I couldn’t help but think of my own grandchildren when this happened, and the grief that I feel is the same,” he said. “After we gather the facts, we need to determine not only what happened and why, but what this suggests we collectively do to diminish the likelihood of it ever happening again.”

In the case that disciplinary action is taken against these three teachers or any others, Urbanski said the union “has an obligation to insist on due process, but not to defend the indefensible.”

White could not give an idea of when the independent investigation might be completed, but he and Le-Bron both said that anyone who failed to do their jobs, from the school to central office, will be held accountable.

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A vigil was held for Trevyan Rowe. MAX SCHULTE/[@MAXROCPHOTO](#)/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER