RCSD: 8 things to look for in 2019

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Both Interim Superintendent Dan Lowengard and his eventual permanent successor will be busy in 2019, which shapes up to be a momentous year in the Rochester City School District. Here are eight things to look forward to based on the expected timing:

TREVYAN ROWE REPORT Late January

June

New York State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia said earlier this month her department and the state Attorney General would release their investigation into the death of 14-year-old Trevyan Rowe by the end of the month — nearly a year after Trevyan’s death.

The report’s potential political impact decreased once Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams announced her resignation, but the district still has not faced the inevitable financial reckoning of Trevyan’s death on its watch (neither has the city of Rochester). Further, it remains to be seen what procedural or structural changes the report will recommend to avoid another tragedy in the future.

RESPONSE TO DISTINGUISHED EDUCATOR REPORT Feb. 8 (and beyond)

Feb. 8 is when the district and board must respond to Jaime Aquino’s initial report, and the drafting of that response has already proven controversial. But that is only one of several steps the district will take regarding the distinguished educator. Elia will need to judge whether the district’s response is official, and both she and Aquino will monitor how well any promised changes are being implemented.

Aquino will continue to issue quarterly reports, and ultimately the district may make the case that his services are no longer needed.

BUDGET PLAN March

The spending plan that Lowengard’s interim administration proposes, likely in March, will go a

Association and the Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester will see their contracts expire June 30. There are two schools of thought regarding negotiating new labor deals with an interim superintendent: either get it done so the new leader doesn’t have to worry about it, or sign a short-term extension wait for the full-time leader to address it more fully with the confidence of the board that chose him or her.

RTA President Adam Urbanski said he would be open to either approach. Whether it happens this year or next, the negotiation of those contracts will be important; the majority of the district’s budget is tied up in personnel costs, so any serious cost-savings measures will likely need to be addressed contractually.

SCHOOL BOARD PRIMARY ELECTION September

Growing discord on the school board was a major theme in 2018; it seems likely to come to a head in 2019, when four of the seven seats — Judith Davis, Liz Hallmark, Beatriz LeBron and Willa Powell — are up for grabs.

Turnover of even one or two seats could prove critical in either shoring up or isolating LeBron and Natalie Sheppard’s activist wing. Davis and LeBron are both filling out previous terms and would be seeking their first full terms; Powell is the longest-serving member.

EAST HIGH SCHOOL TBD

The partnership between RCSD and the University of Rochester to operate East High School was memorialized in a five-year agreement signed in 2020. That means that, if it is to continue, negotiations must begin some time later this year.

East has made great gains under UR’s leadership, but it has come at a significant cost and rankled those who think the district’s money should be spread more evenly across all its schools. School Board President Van White remains the partnership’s greatest supporter, so it will likely fall to him to navigate an extension.

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long way toward establishing and funding the priorities set out in the Rowe and Aquino reports as well as other important areas, including special education.

The district already anticipates a difficult budget year due to its growing structural deficit and depleted fund balance, and City Council has promised closer scrutiny. The district and board have avoided conflict with the Rochester Teachers Association in recent years by adding positions, even as enrollment falls; this may be the year that changes.

**SPECIAL EDUCATION CONSENT DECREED TBD**

The district has been working with a community task force on special education and the Empire Justice Center on a set of promises and goals related to its long-troubled special education department. It is not clear when that agreement will be published and signed — it already has been pushed back — but Empire Justice Center, the would-be plaintiffs, have warned it will not come cheap.

**A NEW SUPERINTENDENT April or May**

In case you forgot, the district is negotiating all the above situations without a permanent leader. It has retained a search firm and hopes to have someone in place before the end of the school year.

**UNION CONTRACTS**

Both the Rochester Teachers

Dylan Anne Runyan-Pauly, RCSD Special Education Counsel, listens to a press conference about Trevenya Rowe’s death on March 15, 2018. MAX SCHULTE / ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Jaime Aquino, distinguished educator, talks about the changes that are needed in the Rochester City School District during his meeting with the Democrat & Chronicle editorial board on Nov. 15, 2018. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Daniel Lowengard, the Rochester City School District interim superintendent. FILE PHOTO

East High School. FILE PHOTO