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Great Schools for All: Distinguished Educator's Report Underscores Need for an Immediate Communitywide Response to the Crisis in City Schools

GS4A says interdistrict magnet schools will offer educational opportunities in the city and suburbs, even as the RCSD works to overhaul its governance, operations and finances

- Dr. Aquino's report describes a school district with enormous administrative, operational, governance and financial problems and offers a timeline for addressing many internal problems, but he does not state or suggest that real solutions also require the involvement of the larger Rochester/Monroe County community.
- While we agree that the board and superintendent must commit to repairing these broken systems, we also believe – based on extensive national research - that a communitywide effort to build truly diverse, socioeconomically integrated schools is essential to improving the educational outcomes for the poorest children in our community. There is no reason to believe, after 30 years of worsening educational failure, that internal repairs alone will end this crisis.
- We believe that Dr. Aquino and the Commissioner of Education MaryEllen Elia should call on community leaders and school districts throughout Monroe County to go beyond their traditional missions and work together to jointly develop and administer diverse schools that will improve the quality of education for all children.
- Dr. Aquino and the commissioner should commit to supporting these collaborative efforts by advocating for any financial incentives and legislative/regulatory changes needed to move forward.

Who We Are . . .

Great Schools for All (GS4A) began in 2014 as a small group from the 10-congregation Urban Presbyterians Together (UPT) consortium. The group began exploring problems with urban schools and was motivated to act after reading “Hope and Despair in the American City: Why There Are No Bad Schools in Raleigh,” by Gerald Grant, Professor Emeritus, Syracuse University. We asked what we could learn from Raleigh, NC, that might be applied in Rochester.

In April 2014, eleven people from Rochester traveled to Wake County, NC, to explore ways to break down the effects of the concentration of poverty in public schools, interviewing over 75 community and school leaders. In November 2014, five Raleigh leaders traveled north to participate in a day-long educational symposium with some 150 participants from a broad cross-section of the greater Rochester community.

From these discussions in our community, and with leaders in Raleigh and other communities, Great Schools for All emerged as a broad cross-section of community volunteers with the vision and mission asserting that every family, every child in our community, no matter their zip code or income, will be guaranteed access to an excellent public school.

The purpose of GS4A is to build a network of socioeconomically diverse magnet schools open on a voluntary basis to students from across Monroe County, with the goal of reducing the impact of concentrated poverty and improving educational outcomes for all students. We envision existing school districts, colleges or partner organizations will work together to operate these schools. This is the surest, shortest and least expensive remedy for high-poverty schools. It may also be the most promising way to address the myriad issues raised by the distinguished educator’s report on the Rochester City School District.

Key Takeaways from the Distinguished Educator’s report

Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino’s 61-page November Review of the Rochester City School District contains more than 100 findings and recommendations.

Taken as a whole, the report is a devastating portrait of the city school system. In its present condition, the report suggests that the district lacks the systems and protocols needed to implement changes even if they are clearly defined by the superintendent. It seems unlikely that the district *by itself* can significantly improve student outcomes, given the concentration of poverty in its schools.

Among the most disturbing findings:

- New board members receive no orientation, and very little professional development and training—and yet are expected to oversee a nearly \$1 billion annual school budget.
- Numerous strategic planning initiatives fail to shape meaningful progress. The current plan, known as The Path Forward, includes recommendations for two interdistrict magnet schools, but no implementation plan has been put forward.
- District leaders are more focused on operations than on instruction.
- There is no process to select or vet instructional materials. Schools are unevenly resourced, but most students are not allowed to take books home.
- Curriculum and content areas vary greatly from grade to grade and school to school—which means that the many students who change schools one or more times during a school year are at a constant disadvantage.
- The district lacks a system to hold staff accountable for the accomplishment of identifiable goals.
- Most stakeholders (board, staff, community) do not understand the seriousness of the district’s structural deficit and assume there will always be more money. Meanwhile, the district does not consistently comply with competitive bidding requirements for applicable purchases.
- The report notes that there are frequently low expectations of students, and lack of a clear focus on developing a vision and strategies for improving student outcomes.

There are many more troubling findings in the report, and it is clear that it will take an enormous, skillful and focused effort to build a district that graduates the vast majority of its students on time and ready for college or work. Repairing the district is a moral obligation and critical to the economic future of Monroe County. But such changes will require strong leadership and take years to achieve.

In the meantime, what about the children? How many more children will be denied the educational opportunities they need and deserve as the district works to build effective systems and procedures?

Great Schools for All believes, based on data from across the country, that the concentration of poverty effectively denies thousands of the poorest children in our community the resources, opportunities and expectations needed to succeed academically and in life.

As important as it is to address the failures cited in the Aquino report, there is no way to guarantee great schools for all without interdistrict collaboration to build truly diverse schools to serve urban and suburban children.

The failure of Rochester schools is a community problem, not just a city problem. But the collaboration required now to launch new schools, even as the RCSD undergoes a systems overhaul, is not and must not be seen as a bailout— affluent suburban districts rescuing the city and its children.

Rather, an effective solution must emerge from the understanding that children do not *belong* to a municipality or school district, but that they belong to one community. They are all *our* children.

Decades of research across the country shows unequivocally that socioeconomic integration of schools will dramatically improve outcomes for the most economically disadvantaged children in our community. They also will nurture skills that all students, even the most affluent, will need in the 21st century—problem solving, critical thinking, the ability to work with and appreciate people from very different backgrounds and perspectives, creativity and open-mindedness. And findings from a professional survey of Rochester and suburban parents indicate strong support for such diverse interdistrict magnet schools that offer educational opportunities not otherwise available to city or suburban students.

For too long, too many of us have been content to be critical spectators, watching from the sidelines and casting blame as city schools falter under the immense burdens of poverty. Great Schools for All urges school boards, superintendents, elected officials, community activists, business leaders, religious leaders and every citizen to embrace the changes that will improve the lives of all our children and make ours a better and more economically viable community.

As a Community, What We Can and Must Do. . .

- Challenge community leaders to develop solutions needed to solve district problems.
- Submit an aggressive proposal for NYS school integration funding to provide resources for a cross-district network of magnet schools.
- Challenge city and county leaders to commit to a new approach aimed at accomplishing great schools with reduced concentrations of poverty for all students in the Community of Monroe.
- Coordinate the community education design with organizations and agencies involved in the Rochester and Monroe County Anti-Poverty Initiative.
- Invite Rochester area colleges to support the effort with staffing and research and in any other ways that might be identified.
- Articulate possible features of a Rochester Recipe for Renewal which would be an alternative to receivership protocols or a state take-over of the Rochester CSD and petition Commissioner Elia and Chancellor Rosa for NYS approval of a trial approach to improving our community's schools based on the mission and vision of Great Schools for All.
- Create magnet schools across existing district lines which would be comprised of voluntary applicants, with no more than 50% poverty-level students assigned to any one school.
- Establish timelines (similar to the action steps in Dr. Aquino's report appendix) for one-year, two-year and five-year benchmarks.