

Van White blasts past, promises changes

Gary McLendon, Staff writer 10:32 p.m. EDT April 23, 2014



(Photo: Gary McLendon)

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Rochester Board of Education President Van White on Wednesday blasted what he said have been decades of poor leadership in Rochester public schools and vowed the district will soon make significant educational progress.

"What you're going to see in next six months are people having ideas and us acting on them," said White. "Within the next six months, you will see measurable, meaningful change in this district. I guarantee you that."

White's guarantee — and criticism of what he said amounts to a lack of vision, cohesion, oversight and follow-through in the district's Central Office — came during his keynote speech at the Friends of Educational Excellence Partnerships' 2014 Annual Meeting at School of the Arts High School.

FREE volunteers help students in 12 city elementary schools.

"We need to keep it simple," White said. "... We need to do the things we say we're going to do. We need to do the things that we're supposed to do by law. ... And we need to replicate the things that we do well."

He said he's seeking change because numerous programs are either funded or dropped during the district's budget process without an analysis of whether the programs are educationally worthwhile.



From left, Friends of Educational Excellence Partnerships board member Phyllis Walker chats with Hank Rubin and Jennifer Leonard of the Rochester Area Community Foundation before Wednesday's FREE Partnerships' meeting. (Photo: KRIS J. MURANTE/staff photographer)

White, who took over as board president three months ago, said: "I think we've made things in education entirely too complicated, and we've gotten lost."

White said that shortly after he was sworn in as president earlier this year, he examined the district's policy handbook and determined that over the last three decades, 26 policies that require significant action by district superintendents have been ignored.

"We have 26 policies on the books where not a single superintendent has ever done what the board — and I'm talking about boards over three decades — has directed him to do."

For example, said White, a 1978 "Small Schools" policy adopted to improve student performance via smaller class sizes has never produced a single superintendent report. "And that is true for other policies."

In another instance, White said, the district, in letters sent to parents within the last 10 years, failed to notify parents of their legal right to appeal their child's suspensions to the Board of Education.

"We must do what we are obligated by law," he said.

White also said what is going well in the district — such as the 85 percent four-year graduation rate at SOTA — is not being replicated in other schools.

"This district is terrible at best practices," said White. "Do you know for the last two superintendents I've not been able to convince them to replicate what we do here? That's insane."

Yet, White said, he is optimistic things will improve because: "... the margin for improvement in our district is great. We can have hope because we're doing so many things so badly."

Prior to White's comments, Bruce Pollock, executive director of Friends of Educational Excellence, highlighted FREE's philosophy: that all children need hope, faith, peace and love to help them be good students.

Pollock thanked his staff and the 500 people who volunteer in city schools.

FREE volunteers help students in city elementary Schools 4, 7, 10, 15, 16, 22, 29, 34, 39, 44, 50 and 52.

In deference to their efforts, White prefaced his remarks by emphasizing that educating children "is very difficult and challenging work." He also thanked FREE for promoting values "that make a difference in a child's life."

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