

My name is Lovely Warren, and I'm not an educator. I'm the President of the Rochester City Council.

Because I'm not an educator, I won't try to suggest how to fix our schools. There are many others who are far more qualified to do that. Instead, I want to share my perspective as a local legislator.

Firstly, I don't think that anyone will deny that the Rochester City School District is underperforming. And I'm being kind in my choice of words. Regardless of whether you're judging them on standardized test scores, graduation rates, or cost per student, RCSD is found wanting.

Last year, Rochester city school students performed below average on state test scores. Only 20.7% of students met or exceeded English standards, and only 27.3% met or exceeded math standards. That means that over 70% of the students are performing below standard in math and English. That's right, 70%!

I'm sure that everyone is aware of the Schott Foundation for Public Education's report that showed that RCSD had the lowest graduation rates among Black males in the entire country. The report said that RCSD only graduates 9% of black males and 10% of Hispanic males. RCSD Superintendent Bolgen Vargas has challenged the numbers, but regardless of whether the actual graduation rate is 9% or 19%, it's still not acceptable.

Similarly, a report from the Center for Governmental Research that was released last month indicated that RCSD ranked in the top 10 in the nation when it comes to spending per pupil for large school districts. Superintendent Vargas also disputes these findings, but it's still an obvious cause for concern.

It would appear that the tax payers of Rochester are spending far more than other cities to get results that are far worse than other cities. That's not a good combination.

As a legislator, this causes an interesting dilemma. The City will write a check for approximately \$120 million dollars to the Rochester City School District. That's the largest single item in the City's budget. Yet, the way administrative powers are set up, neither the Mayor, nor City Council, has any authority over how these funds are spent. We also have no real way to impact the results that are obtained from that expenditure. It's the ultimate example of financial responsibility without administrative authority.

While I don't believe that Mayoral control is the answer, you can see why the Mayor and City Council might be tempted to push for increased input and control if we don't begin to see better results from such a huge investment in education.

Seeing the unacceptable results that we're getting from such a large expenditure is disappointing to say the least. The Mayor and City Council struggle each year to find ways to meet difficult budget constraints. Yet \$120 million is completely untouchable.

This method of funding needs to be addressed at the state level. Unfunded mandates are an ongoing source of frustration.

If this were the private sector, we probably wouldn't continue to spend so much money on an investment that's yielding such poor results. But this isn't the private sector, and we can't give up on our children.

What we're currently doing obviously isn't working. Albert Einstein once said that "the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results". Yet that's exactly what we've done with our schools.

As I said, I'm not an educator. I don't know how to fix our schools. But I do know that we can't continue with the status quo. We have to be willing to try radical solutions, and to make severe changes. EVERYTHING needs to be up for discussion. Nothing can be declared "off limits". This problem can't be solved if our options are limited due to a need to protect sacred cows.

Everything, from how we fund our schools, to how we engage parents, to how we administer classes, has to be subject to discussion and debate.

Studies show a strong correlation between education and crime. A high school dropout is far more likely to end up in jail than a high school or college graduate. One study found that 25% of young Black male dropouts were either in prison or otherwise institutionalized. So by graduating such a low percentage of its Black and Hispanic male students, RCSD is inadvertently becoming a feeder system for our prisons.

As a legislator, I have to look at the long-term implications of our failing schools. High dropout rates today mean higher costs for police in the future. An under-educated populace means that businesses won't have the skilled workforce that they'll need for the high tech jobs of the future. Without the workforce that they need, businesses will leave our region, and we won't be able to attract new businesses. It also means that we'll have more people who are in need of social programs in order to offset the poverty that will result from the lack of jobs.

So as you can see, this isn't just an inner-city problem. The crime that results from our high dropout rates will spill into the suburbs. The lack of skilled workers will affect suburban companies as well as companies that are located in the city. Poor schools will limit the ability of suburban companies to recruit talent to our region, just as it will limit companies that are located within the city limits.

The dropout rate is driving the nation's increasing prison population, and it's a drag on America's economic competitiveness. So parents, teachers, administrators, businesses, and government are all going to have to work together to find solutions to what I believe is the definitive problem of our time.

I started out by pointing out that I'm not an educator. But I have one additional point that I need to make, and this is specifically directed to our educators.

Urban education isn't easy. It has inherent problems. And teaching in the Rochester City School District has its own unique set of problems and challenges.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 54% of Rochester's youth under the age of 18 live in poverty. That's makes Rochester the 7<sup>th</sup> highest ranked city in terms of youth poverty. Rochester school children also have a history of truancy that has been well-documented. On the average day, as many as 4,000 students are absent from RCSD classrooms. Fourteen percent of the kindergarten students are absent. All of these numbers indicate that there may be to problems in the home.

On any given day, the typical RCSD teacher is likely to have children in their class who weren't fed before they were sent to school. They're likely to have children in their class who may not have been properly dressed and groomed before coming to school. They're likely to have children in their class who are experiencing domestic violence or abuse at home. They're likely to have a few children in their class whose parents don't, or can't, help them with their homework.

These are your realities. They make it harder for you to do your job. We all know that. But we also know that the children didn't cause these problems. They're the victims of these problems.

But you, on the other hand, aren't victims. You CHOSE to do this job. You made a decision to become a teacher, and you made a decision to teach in the Rochester City School District. As adults, you have the option of leaving and teaching elsewhere if you desire. You have options.

Most of the children who attend school in the Rochester City School District don't have options. They can't move. Most of their parents can't afford to move out of the district or send them to private schools. They have no options.

That's a sobering thought. But it's one that every RCSD teacher, principal, and administrator needs to be keenly aware of every day when they prepare go to work.

It's the children who are the victims, not the adults. And we all have to remember that as we work together to fix this very difficult problem.