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Mayor Robert Duffy plants flag on Rochester schools takeover

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Mayor Robert J. Duffy kicked off his second term on Friday by vowing to take that hill.

The mayor, after being sworn in, said the city would try to take over the City School District, and he cast aside any doubt that he would let potential political skirmishes dissuade him from that 2010 goal.

"There is a saying: 'Pick the hill you want to die on,'" Duffy said. "Well, I have, and education is that hill."

The assembled crowd of more than 200 people at City Hall applauded. The mayor made it clear in an inaugural speech that he has chosen a new major issue to tackle in the new year, and he seemed to revel in knowing his goal.

But it is not the only issue on Duffy's large 2010 plate.

Duffy has set an aggressive agenda for his second term, most notably his goal of full consolidation and oversight of the school district. Other priorities include the redevelopment of Midtown, targeted investment and restructuring of challenged neighborhoods and improved public safety.

Duffy said the homicide rate and violent-crime rate had dropped in 2009, and he credited improved policing. He singled out the city's fire and police departments for their recent public safety efforts.

The mayor pledged to tackle controversial topics directly, and not busy himself with concern about managing relationships and egos.

He has called the city and schools consolidation a "political fireball," but added: "I've stood by for four years on this and, while I've talked behind the scenes, I'm committed now to go in a different direction."

And Duffy has yet to announce his senior management team, after taking the unusual step in November of asking them to resign and reapply.

Duffy reminded constituents that the graduation rate in the city has only recently pushed back upward to about 50 percent — while the city is paying \$22,000 per student, annually. The school budget is 73 percent of the city's property tax levy, he said, and is producing below-average returns.

"We cannot accept graduation rates of less than 90 percent," said Duffy.

Duffy said he would keep district Superintendent Jean-Claude Brizard in place.

After the speech, Brizard said he would avoid taking a stance on the issue, while aiming to improve the quality of education in 2010.

"We are going to keep working and keep our heads down," said Brizard.

The proposal brought out supporters. Sandy Parker, president of the Rochester Business Alliance, said her group supports the mayor's consolidation efforts.

Also lending support will be incoming City Council President Lovely Warren, who introduced Duffy and gave her support to the plan publicly.

Before the ceremony, Warren said the system that is currently in place has resulted in disappointing educational results for years.

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Staff writer Brian Sharp contributed to this story.