

Future foggy as Jean-Claude Brizard departs

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and **Brian Sharp**

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He closed failing schools, overhauled the budget and pushed to tie teacher salaries to performance, but as Jean-Claude Brizard departs Rochester, some wonder if education officials will continue the controversial work he started.

Whether those reforms continue will largely hinge on whom the school board selects as Brizard's replacement, both in the interim and as a permanent successor.

As city leaders lined up Monday to consider the future of the City School District in the wake of Brizard's resignation Monday, influential business and political figures were consistent: The departure poses a serious threat to Rochester's school reform efforts.

"Yet another attempt at reform of the City School District has come to a screeching halt," said Mayor Thomas Richards. "We cannot push that off with explanations ... Maybe a greater consensus of people will come together and say, 'OK, I've had it.' If that's what comes of it, then maybe that will be his lasting contribution."

For many, Brizard's departure — which he said in an interview came in part because of divisive dynamics within the school board — reinforced long-held perceptions about the effectiveness of the school system's leadership. That boiled over last year when former Mayor Robert Duffy proposed dissolving the school board and turning control of the district over to the mayor.

Richards said he will push for structural reform of the district but stopped short of defining what that change should be. He is supportive of mayoral control but has said he is open to other options. During the recent mayoral campaign, Richards said school reform would not be a priority during his first year in office and voiced support for Brizard.

Some high-profile community leaders agreed that some sort of serious change is imperative.

"I don't think the current system would allow for the kind of changes that we need

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overall," said Joel Seligman, president of the University of Rochester.

Others suggested that the solution may not lie in governance, but in individuals — not only in the superintendent's office but on the school board. Four of the seven school board seats are up for grabs in this year's election.

"It's going to take the community to make some change," said Sandy Parker, president of the Rochester Business Alliance. "I would hope that conversation will happen as we go into the fall election. That certainly will be an area that we will have conversations on trying to find qualified people who might be willing to fill those positions."

Rochester Teachers Association Adam Urbanski dismissed both those ideas, saying that there is no evidence mayoral control improves schools and that putting people on the school board who lack education experience could be detrimental.

"It was a bad idea when they first raised it," Urbanski said. "It is a worse idea now."

Current school board members say they will remain committed to the initiatives Brizard started when he came to Rochester — even unpopular plans that have drawn criticism from a vocal group of parent activists and the teachers union. Amid rumors that Brizard was looking to leave, board members held a press conference last week to try to make the case that Brizard should stay and finish the reforms

he started.

"People are mistaken if they think some of the things that caused angst are going away just because he is," said board member Van White. "We will see the work through."

But those reforms have also contributed to an increasingly hostile environment for Brizard, and even some of his strongest backers on the board have waned in their support of them. The board recently rejected Brizard's proposal to close two schools. It also signed off on an agreement to award raises to non-teaching employees, a contract that did not carry the recommendation of the superintendent. Earlier this year, the teachers union conducted a no confidence vote in his leadership.

Some of the names being floated by city and school board leaders as potential replacements include some outspoken critics of Brizard's reforms. Urbanski and White mentioned former interim

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superintendent Bill Cala, and Urbanski and City Council President Lovely Warren suggested former administrator Marilynn Patterson-Grant, who sued the school district for discrimination after Brizard fired her for what he called concerns about her performance.

School board President Malik Evans said the board did not have any potential candidates for an interim superintendent, but that they remain open to suggestions.

Brizard's resignation came Monday morning after Chicago Mayor-elect Rahm Emanuel announced that he had tapped the school leader to take over the Chicago public school district.

In a phone interview from Chicago, Brizard said his decision to leave was multifaceted. He described the position leading one of the nation's largest school systems as an "amazing opportunity." But he also said his frustrations working under Rochester's school board, known for long meetings, occasional bickering and petty politics, played a role. Brizard said that he started considering looking at other jobs when the board dragged its feet renewing his contract in the fall. His contract was eventually renewed, and he was to make \$235,000 this year.

"The dynamic of the board, it would be dishonest to say it did not play a role. Every decision was a heavy lift. The infighting was distracting for everyone."

He said that he hopes the board will lean

on top level administrators to keep his initiatives going after he leaves.

Brizard said he is not sure when exactly he will start in Chicago. Emanuel takes office May 16, and after that school leaders there can finalize Brizard's appointment.

Meanwhile, Rochester school board members are trying to work out their own logistics. Brizard's contract includes a clause that states any breach must be mutual. The board is exploring its legal options, which could include a financial penalty.

The board met in an executive session Monday night to discuss the contract, and how to find an interim superintendent. The board will likely conduct a national search for a new leader, a process that Evans said could take over a year and cost well over \$100,000.

"We don't want to waste a lot of time," Evans said.

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Who they hire could determine whether the last three years were wasted.

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