

New schools chief Brizard largely likable but often not liked

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ROCHESTER, N.Y. — Ordered by Rahm Emanuel not to answer questions, Jean-Claude Brizard dodged the media for days.

Finally cornered in the corridors of the Rochester School District Thursday evening by a Sun-Times reporter, the man the mayor-elect picked to run the nation's third largest school district beamed his winning smile, leaned in and asked, "How can I help you, without getting in trouble?"

At once disarming and unhelpful, the Rochester superintendent's response seemed to reveal little beyond a healthy fear of a politician who once sent a dead fish to one of his enemies.

But the charismatic way he pulled it off is typical of the ambitious former physics teacher who emigrated from Haiti as a boy, used the U.S. education system to drag himself up by the bootstraps from housing project poverty, then applied the same zeal to reforming the system that helped him, say friends and enemies alike in this upstate New York city of 210,000.

It's a side of Brizard, 47, that has yet to shine in Chicago, where Emanuel's inaccurate claim about Rochester graduation rates under Brizard's watch and the school chief's ugly exit from the district have made headlines.

Largely unheard of in Chicago thanks to Brizard's silence are compelling stories that could have been ripped from a gritty-but-uplifting Hollywood script. There's the time he was threatened with a knife for his bus pass, or picked up a chair to defend himself against students at Riker's Island Jail, or caught 100 kids smoking weed in a high school basement while their clueless principal listened to classical music in her office. Even his hobby of flying aircraft has been used as a colorful metaphor for running schools.

Such is Brizard's charm that the teachers' union official who has ripped his leadership more than anyone else, Adam Urbanski, describes him as "enormously likable."

Urbanski was so impressed by a brief encounter in 2007 that he encouraged Brizard — then a high-ranking administrator over New York City High Schools — to apply for the Rochester job. The union boss, who has a national reputation as a progressive, pro-reform leader, penned a column welcoming

him when he arrived upstate in 2008.

The relationship quickly soured.

Charm's limits

If Brizard's first meeting with Urbanski was a hit, his last, just over three years later, on March 29, was a fiasco. By then, Urbanski says, talks on an expired teachers contract had been at an impasse for months.

A series of events had led the two sides not to speak for weeks, including: a 95 percent vote of no-confidence from teachers angry at his aggressive program of school closures; his proposed cuts to arts programs; raises he granted to district executives; an \$80 million budget deficit that could cost 770 of 3,500 teachers their jobs; his introduction of a loathed "rubber room" where suspended teachers must sit while they are investigated; his efforts to introduce performance pay; his disbanding of an elected council of parent advisors and, above all, his perceived high-handedness.

With civic leaders concerned the toxic atmosphere could derail reform, both men agreed to a meeting mediated by a Rochester businessman.

It was effectively over in seconds.

"Jean-Claude didn't even say 'Hello,' " Urbanski recalls. "He just strode in and said, 'Would you take a pay cut?' "

Strained relations between unions and superintendents are nothing new in Rochester, and Brizard retained the backing of most of the school board, the business community and Mayor Thomas Richards, who praises his "fortitude in standing up for what he thought children needed amid a lot of push and shove."

But even staunch supporters concede his style made unnecessary enemies and exhausted political capital.

Rochester Business Alliance president Sandy Parker blames the union for most of Brizard's problems and says he "didn't accomplish what he set out to accomplish because he had so many obstacles he had to fight — every morning he got up and had a fight on his hands."

"He's a highly professional person. He's passionate about trying to reform the school district and he's very resilient. We were just thrilled with the direction he was going in," Parker said.

But she added, "He didn't take the time he needed to spend with teachers to get them to understand what he was trying to do."

Brizard's failure to negotiate a union contract with an initially sympathetic union in Rochester poses an awkward question about his ability to do so in Chicago, where a teacher's union official called Brizard's tenure "troubling." If repeated in Chicago, such a failure could complicate Emanuel's key education proposals of lengthening the school day and introducing merit pay for teachers.

Graduation rates

Emanuel claimed last week that Brizard's willingness to shake things up and "put children first" boosted

Rochester's high school graduation rate from 39 percent to 51 percent in three years under his leadership.

But the 39 percent figure dates back to 2006, well before Brizard became Rochester superintendent in January 2008. And the 51 percent figure reflects five years of graduates, ending in 2010 -- not three.

Brizard's undated resume lists an even steeper climb, stating that he raised rates from 39 percent to 52 percent. That trajectory again starts in 2006, well before his tenure, and ends after his first eight months.

It fails to mention that rates went on to fall in his first full year, to 46 percent, but are expected to rise to 51 percent for 2010 – still less than the 52 percent on Brizard's resume.

Rochester officials blamed the tumble on tougher graduation standards, though Rochester's rate dived more than any of New York's four other big-city district, state data shows. They defend the use of 2006 figures as a starting point, saying those were the most recent figures available when Brizard took office.

The steep graduation improvement “is the big whoop-de-do reason Rahm gave for bringing him in,” said Julie Woestehoff of Chicago's Parent's United for Responsible Education. “This raises serious questions about whether [Brizard] is telling the truth and whether he did anything at all.”

Emanuel's team also praised his work for New York City schools, noting high school graduation rates jumped 13 percent from 2005 to 2009, but it's unclear how much credit Brizard deserves for the increase. Brizard worked in four jobs in five years as a district administrator, including a year as executive director of the high school division in 2005-06 and a year as a regional superintendent. He was long gone by 2009.

CUNY Professor David C. Bloomfield, who worked with Brizard in New York City, urged Chicagoans confused by the number soup to “forget the data” and concentrate on Brizard's reputation.

“He hasn't had a job long enough or with enough direct responsibility to establish a lengthy record in New York or Rochester,” said Bloomfield. “He established himself in my mind as someone deeply knowledgeable about instruction, as committed to the improvement of public schools, and as interested in reality-checking central policies with parents and principals.”

Testing claims that Brizard is a “visionary” is similarly difficult based on his record in Rochester, where he won a reputation for radicalism by instituting policies that have been in place in Chicago for at least a decade.

As Rochester Schools superintendent, Brizard closed or reconstituted 12 of Rochester's 19 high schools; Chicago has closed dozens of failing schools. He's opened five; Chicago has opened more than 100.

Saturday classes, school safety audits and walk-through metal detectors at every high school are all also landmark Brizard policies that have been in place for years in Chicago.

And Brizard's “portfolio plan” to phase out failing schools and replace them with new ones is reminiscent of Mayor Daley's Renaissance 2010 call to create 100 new schools from the ashes of as many as 70 troubled ones.

The Renaissance School Fund, which bankrolled part of that project, recently announced plans to expand charter schools to serve up to 20 percent of all CPS students within five years — setting up

Brizard for yet another fight with the CTU, which is barred from organizing at charter schools.

Star reformer

Brizard does bring some new elements to Chicago. As a former New York City high school teacher and principal he carries the in-the-trenches experience no Chicago Schools CEO has possessed in 16 years.

And critics who say Chicago has shown favoritism to magnet schools may be pleased to hear that Brizard has pushed “equity in resources,” so cash isn’t stockpiled in favored schools, and students with special needs or English as a second language aren’t all dumped in one school, said Mary Doyle, his school innovation boss.

“As an English language learner himself, he’s incredibly concerned about making sure everyone has a quality education regardless of what issues they might have,” Doyle said.

He also addressed concerns that black and Latino boys were disproportionately suspended — a complaint of some Chicago student groups — by switching to in-school suspension, a controversial trick that dramatically reduced Rochester’s suspension rate but did little to quell juvenile crime, critics including the parent group Community Education Task Force say.

“Figures lie, and lies figure,” parent Wallace Smith said.

Rochester school district parent Patti Gallivan credits Brizard with being “unapologetic” about confronting Rochester’s graduation rate and failing schools. She likes the monthly updates he gave to a Student Leadership Congress – which includes her two children – and his efforts to make principals more accountable.

“I think he has a lot of vision,” Gallivan said. But when it came to his budget and other controversies, “he could have dedicated more time to working with parents, to helping people understand his rationale.”

The Broad Superintendents Academy, a prestigious training ground where Brizard was groomed for a top job, was cursed by Rochester activists like teacher Tracey Farmer, who angrily referred to its “corporate Broad school privatization ideology.” But its pro-business agenda likely scored as a plus with Emanuel, who has made former Chicago Board of Trade CEO David Vitale his school board president.

Vitale, also a former top CPS official under Arne Duncan, interviewed Brizard around 2004 to run Chicago’s high schools.

Brizard is impressive, Vitale said, because “he had a successful career at managing a large section of a large urban district,” as well as high schools, which is “perhaps our biggest challenge in Chicago.” And, “even though Rochester is a small district, there is value to the experience of having been superintendent or the leader of a district.”

Vitale believes a new union deal can be signed on Brizard’s watch, regardless of his Rochester experience.

Surprisingly, the Rochester union chief, Urbanski, agrees. Saying the educator is someone who “doesn’t learn, but he still could,” Urbanski said Brizard has the chance to “do what Nixon did in China,” referring to the Cold War warrior’s unlikely role as peacemaker in the Far East.

As long as the mayor-elect is happy, a protracted fight is unlikely to faze Brizard.

Told that his record had been trashed by many in Rochester and Chicago — and given one final chance to defend himself — Brizard again flashed his winning smile.

“If you upset the status quo, you upset people,” he shrugged.

Contributing: Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, AP