

Cases made for and against mayoral control of Rochester schools

Brian Sharp • Staff writer • May 1, 2010

At times, the audience applauded Friday evening, as arguments were made for and against mayoral control of city schools.

And at times, they jeered.

"If this was Brighton or Spencerport or Greece ... if they had a 46 percent graduation rate, believe me, they would be screaming for mayoral control as well," panelist and City Council President Lovely Warren said during the latest forum on the subject.

As many clapped in support, a man in the audience objected: "You can applaud, but it's not true."

The disagreement — and, at times, outright distrust of the panelists and their respective sectors — illustrated the frustration and division surrounding the school system and mayoral control.

More than 100 people attended the forum, hosted by Sigma Pi Phi fraternity at the Rochester Academy of Medicine on East Avenue. Sigma Pi Phi is the nation's oldest fraternity for college-educated, professional African-Americans. Jim Lawrence, the *Democrat and Chronicle* editorial page editor, was the moderator.

Warren was joined on the panel by **Sandy Parker, president of the Rochester Business Alliance**, and Mayor Robert Duffy, all of whom support mayoral control. The other panelists were Adam Urbanski, president of the teachers union, and Malik Evans, president of the school board, who oppose it.

All urged change but differed on whether mayoral control was a step forward or a failed promise. Duffy wants state approval to make the district a city department, dissolve the school board and appoint an advisory panel for a five-year trial period.

While supporters pointed to the district's 46 percent four-year graduation rate, Evans highlighted the 13 percentage-point gain made over three years before it dropped for the class of 2009.

The city would be better served, Evans said, to focus its efforts on addressing urban decay and the lack of stability in city neighborhoods.

"What happens outside the classroom affects what goes on in the classroom," Evans said. "We are kidding ourselves if we think mayoral control is going to change that."

Duffy argued education failures have contributed to poverty in the city, where 65 percent to 70 percent of crimes involve dropouts.

"I am not saying that one simple governance change is the answer to all the problems," Duffy said. "(But) we either keep doing the same things over again or we try something different. ... The fear is losing something. Well, we're losing kids."

And from Parker: "Our region needs a successful city at its core, and we cannot expect our city to succeed if our schools are failing. We are looking for a way

out of a system that hasn't worked consistently for a long time."

Too many students lack skills to be employable, Parker said. Fifty-six percent of city graduates attend Monroe Community College, Warren added, and most have to take remedial courses.

"They pay a college tuition for a high school education," Warren said. "How is that fair?"

True reform, however, must address housing, juvenile justice, health and wellness, Urbanski said. Changing school governance alone "will change very little," he said. "What can the mayor do that the school board cannot?"

Urbanski decried stripping city residents of their right to vote for a school board. That was William Clark's primary concern as well. Clark, president and CEO of the Urban League of Rochester, is sire archon-elect, the equivalent of chapter president-elect, for Sigma Pi Phi.

"At some point," he said in an earlier interview, "you have to weigh the voting against the actual outcomes of our students and their future. Is that (voting for school board) something we should be concerned about?"



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Rochester Business Alliance President Sandy Parker, center, listens to City Council President Lovely Warren. (ADRIAN KRAUS)

What's next

A community forum with Mayor Robert Duffy is set for 7 to 8:30 p.m. Tuesday at Phillis Wheatley Library, 33 Dr. Samuel McCree Way. RSVP to (585) 428-8212. It's sponsored by the Rundel Library Foundation.