

Supporters push to get school plan approved

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It was Mayor Robert Duffy who first brought forward a plan for the city to take control of the Rochester City School District, but facing the possibility that he will reside in Albany next year, others are stepping forward to help push the legislation in the state Legislature.

A coalition of local politicians and business and religious leaders has formed to support the legislation, and an expert in mayoral control efforts said the legislation could benefit from the potential loss of its most vocal proponent.

The Rochester Kids First Coalition plans a push in the coming weeks to take the lead in the debate and find support in the state Senate. The legislation was introduced last week by Gov. David Paterson and has the support of Assemblymen David Gantt, D-Rochester, and Joseph Morelle, D-Irondequoit, but a sponsor in the Senate has yet to step forward.

Sandra Parker, president of the Rochester Business Alliance Inc. and member of the coalition, said she hopes the group's power can help change that.

"We want to see the legislation passed in this legislative session, and we need to put pressure on Sens. Jim Alesi and Joe Robach to support this as they did the mayoral control in New York City," Parker said. "Part of our plan is to provide the push to them that this is something the community really wants to happen."

The coalition also will look to Morelle and Gantt to champion the cause at the state level, said Lovely Warren, City Council president and member of the coalition.

Duffy's possible promotion to statewide office could bring more support to the legislation, said Kenneth Wong, chairman of the education department at Brown University and author of "The Education Mayor."

Often cities proposing to take control of their school districts don't have the relationship with the state government that is needed to get permission for the change, but Duffy's election as lieutenant governor would help bridge this gap, Wong said.

"If Rochester is going to embrace this reform, it could be well-positioned with him in the lieutenant governor's office," Wong said. "There you would have a strong supporter who can mobilize whatever support or influence he has at the state level to make this work for Rochester. Having a fairly close coordination of purpose between the state and city offices would be a very favorable condition for Rochester."

The Rochester Kids First Coalition pulls support from various sectors, including parents of students in the district, retired district officials and representatives from city government. It has produced a 30-second television commercial that began airing Wednesday on local stations to support the legislation. Its members will become more vocal in the coming weeks, doing media interviews and radio talk shows to support the legislation, Parker said.

For Parker, who is featured in the ad, mayoral control is an issue that stretches back several years. In 2007 the RBA urged Duffy to consider a change in school governance. When he came out for it during his inaugural speech in January, the RBA again lent support, saying reform would improve the district and benefit the students who would one day be the work force for local companies.

"We really think the Kids First Coalition should be the voice and the face of this effort," Parker said. "It represents the voice of this community, and it needs to be the driving force. It can't just be one individual doing this. The mayor started the conversation and that's positive, but now it's up to the community to see it through."

The possibility of losing the person who was the most vocal proponent of mayoral control is not necessarily a detriment to its chances of passing, Wong said. Though most mayoral control reforms are tied to a specific mayor, there have been instances when cities have gone through successful changes in officeholders.

In Boston, the legislation lingered through two different mayors before Thomas Menino fully embraced the idea and made it work, Wong said.

"What I've seen is the importance of looking at mayoral control as an institutional reform rather than one tied to an individual mayor," Wong said. "If you designed a governance structure that gets to those institutional elements, with or without Duffy in charge it would set up a structure in a way that any mayor could make use of it."

The legislation would allow the mayor to appoint five members to an education commission that develops policy. City Council would appoint four more. The legislation also would create citywide councils on special education and English language learners, as well as an independent education budget office.

Losing Duffy could help Rochester step back from the emotional aspects of the debate and better judge mayoral control on its merits, Wong said. If he is gone, residents in the city also would be able to judge future mayoral candidates on their plans for the district, he said.

"I know that Duffy has done a great job in defending the initiative, but he

has also received a lot of criticism and personal attacks," Wong said. "To some extent I think it's good to have a calming period if he does move on to the state level."

The coalition is looking to make sure that its members help to guide the effort after it gains state approval, Warren said.

"The biggest thing is to make sure it gets passed in Albany, but secondly we want to make sure that if and when it passes, it's actually implemented so it benefits our children," she said.