

Governance of city schools is not just Mayor Duffy's issue

When Mayor Robert Duffy accepted an invitation to run for lieutenant governor, many people assumed that the idea of reforming school governance would disappear along the campaign trail. Though the Rochester Business Alliance first proposed this idea more than two years ago, it was Mayor Duffy who championed the cause over the past six months and laid out specific plans for how change could work.

So last week, when Gov. David Paterson introduced an education reform bill for Rochester in the state Legislature, it took many by surprise. The bill would institute a five-year trial of a new governance model, placing ultimate accountability for school performance with city government. One opponent called the bill "an affront to the citizens of Rochester," saying "Albany is in no position to lecture the city of Rochester on what good government is."

In my mind, the real affront is that most critics of education reform in Rochester are pursuing adult agendas. They talk about Mayor Duffy, about Albany and about the role of the school board. But they don't say that maintaining the status quo will be good for Rochester children, because they can't.

If you look at Rochester's education system from the perspective of city children and their parents, the need for reform is inescapable.

■ As the school year draws to a close, our four-year graduation rate has dropped



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to 46 percent, the second-lowest of any district in the state.

■ Of 346 city graduates who enrolled in Monroe Community College four years ago, fewer than 9 percent received a degree or certificate in the standard two years.

■ Half the city's high schools are failing to meet basic standards established under the No Child Left Behind Act.

■ Our city's eighth-grade achievement scores are 14 percentage points lower than New York City's in English and 28 points lower in math.

The comparison to New York City is relevant because the state Legislature gave Mayor Michael Bloomberg accountability for the school system there in 2002. Since then, that district's performance has improved steadily, both in graduation rates and test scores. New York City is outperforming Rochester in virtually every measure.

But many critics point out that New York City is not like Rochester—which is precisely why Assemblymen David Gantt and Joseph Morelle, who worked closely with the Paterson administration in drafting the

bill, have tailored the legislation to better fit our community's collaborative approach to solving problems.

Instead of "mayoral control," this legislation gives the City Council a larger role in overseeing schools than the New York City approach. Parents would have more influence over how schools are run, and members of advisory boards that oversee budgets and strategy could be removed only for cause instead of serving at the pleasure of the mayor.

One question the bill does not answer is who Rochester's mayor will be when the governance experiment begins in 2011. If our state has a new lieutenant governor named Bob Duffy, our city will have a new mayor, whether appointed by City Council or chosen in a special election.

That makes this an ideal time to continue the push for education reform. Selecting a new mayor allows us to ensure that education is central to the debate. Just as we expect any mayor to be accountable for public safety and economic development, we can seek a new leader who is willing and able to be held accountable for improving education.

To help make that happen, the Rochester Business Alliance was pleased last week to join the Rochester Kids First Coalition, a group of concerned citizens who support education reform and the enabling legislation. The coalition is co-chaired by Lois Giess, the former City Council president, and Bob Brown, business manager of Local 435 of the Laborers' International

Union. It includes leaders from City Council, the current school board, parent groups and a diverse group of organizations across the community.

The coalition is working to enlist other parents, taxpayers and concerned citizens. The RBA is reaching out to its members, because education is inseparably linked to our local economy. Employers need the area's largest school district to produce graduates who are ready to work or go to college, and our community needs an economically viable city, which requires the city to have educationally viable schools.

One way to think about this issue is to view the reform effort as a relay race. Mayor Duffy was in the leadoff position, demanding education reform and proposing many good ideas. He passed the baton to Assemblymen Gantt and Morelle, who worked with the governor to draft legislation that can make change happen.

Now the baton has been passed back to the community as a whole. It is our time to agree that education reform is essential and to make it a top issue as our community picks its next mayor. The first step in our leg of the race is to ensure that the legislation passes, by lobbying our state senators to support it.

If we win this race, we can pass on better educational opportunities to the children on whom our future depends.

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