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Status quo fails too many kids

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Opponents of education reform in Rochester remind me of a scene in *The Wizard of Oz*, where the “wizard” tries frantically to direct attention away from the curtain that hides his secret.

When Mayor Robert Duffy introduced the concept, critics roared that it was a power grab designed to take resources from the schools. Now that he is running for lieutenant governor, they thunder that it will disenfranchise voters in school board elections.

Recently, Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski said, “I think the real issue is a few powerful politicians and their rich friends in the suburbs trying to get control.”

Rich and powerful? That’s an accurate description of Mr. Urbanski’s organization, which spent \$3.4 million in lobbying and campaign contributions last year.

No, the real issue is the future of Rochester’s children. And while adults who benefit from the current system loudly defend the status quo, those who put children first are demanding change.

Behind the curtain, city young people are being robbed of a bright future. Their four-year graduation rates are second-lowest in the state. Half of their high schools fail to meet federal standards. Eighth-grade English and math achievement are substantially lower than New York City’s.

Why compare to New York City? It is a large urban district, facing problems similar to Rochester’s. Seven years ago, city government there gained oversight of the schools for a six-year trial. Graduation rates and test scores have improved steadily since — and last year, with support from all of our area’s state senators, the legislature extended the new model, which research shows is working in other cities.

This week, legislators are considering a similar reform for Rochester. Our approach would require more involvement by City Council, and give

parents a stronger say in how schools are run.

But it is based on the same principle of city government oversight leading to increased accountability, more efficient operations and improved student performance.

A growing coalition of city parents, school board members, education experts and other residents has formed to support the legislation and help implement the reform. We encourage you to join by visiting www.rochesterkidsfirst.com.

Like the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, our state senators can't make up their minds. Listening to the noisy opposition, they ignore the systemic problems behind the curtain, which haven't improved in 30 years of trying.

They should let our community, like New York City, test a new approach. Senators, you have the knowledge. Please display the courage and the heart to act on behalf of Rochester's children.

Parker is president and CEO of the Rochester Business Alliance and a member of the Rochester Kids First Coalition.