

Jean-Claude Brizard hopes to continue city school reforms

Tiffany Lankes • Staff writer • October 24, 2010

During a visit to one of the high schools he oversaw while working in New York City, Jean-Claude Brizard entered unannounced through a basement door and found about 100 unsupervised students smoking marijuana and kissing.

Their teachers were outside smoking cigarettes. The principal was in her office.

"When I walk in, she's sitting there with her peaceful little waterfall and classical music and the whole school was in chaos," Brizard recently recalled with a candor considered taboo by many public officials.

"It took me years, but I got her fired."

The story highlights many of the things Rochester's schools superintendent believes are wrong with urban education and illuminates the no-nonsense approach toward school reform he brought with him to Rochester three years ago.

In his first three years on the job, Brizard has closed schools with low standardized test scores, reassigned principals he deemed incapable and publicly expressed his intention to hold teachers more accountable for their students' achievement.

Now, with his first contract set to expire at the end of 2010, Brizard and school board president Malik Evans say they are close to a new agreement that will keep him here for another three years.

Even so, as the negotiations between Brizard and the school board drag on, his name keeps coming up as a possible candidate for more prestigious jobs in Washington, D.C., and Newark, N.J., prompting some community leaders to worry that Rochester risks losing him to another district.

"He is a very, very valuable asset to this community, but he is also an appealing prospect for many other cities," said Sandy Parker, president of the Rochester Business Alliance. "They need to make certain that they get a contract in place for him. We should not

be taking the risk of losing him."

Brizard's second tour here could also begin against the backdrop of a renewed debate over who should control the city school system — an elected school board or the mayor. And for the city of Rochester, the direction of the schools has impact far beyond the students, parents and teachers who have direct ties to the school system. The quality of education affects everything from public safety to work force development.

Community activists are calling urban school reform the biggest civil rights issue of the generation.

"We watch about 180 districts that all have 20,000 or more kids and at least 40 percent poverty," said Tim Quinn with the Broad Foundation, which has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on programs to improve urban school systems, and where Brizard is a fellow. "When you look at those 180, there might be 20 or 30 really great superintendents who really get this work and are strong enough to face the challenges out there and are willing to be accountable for the outcomes. JC is one of them."

But changes pushed by Brizard have also brought him detractors, including some longtime fixtures of the Rochester education establishment.

"I have to say that I don't recall any prior superintendent who enjoyed less confidence and support from teachers than Jean-Claude Brizard," said Adam Urbanski, longtime president of the Rochester Teachers Association, whose ideas about how best to attack the school system's enduring



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problems differ substantially from Brizard's.

The superintendent's reforms are guided by an ambitious strategic plan that promises to use data and evaluations to hold school employees accountable and strips power from principals, forcing them to prove their programs work to earn more independence. The plan turns the district's funding system on its head, redistributing dollars to get more money to the neediest students.

Brizard, 47, started embarking on his plan immediately after coming to Rochester in 2008. He interviewed district principals and has since replaced about 18, many of whom he put in other jobs but some, he admits, were fired or pushed out. He then ruffled the feathers of the teachers union when he started an in-school suspension system that critics said allowed unruly students to stay in the classroom, and then stopped the practice of keeping middle school students out of school for two weeks while high schoolers took Regents exams.

One of Brizard's top priorities is fixing a teacher evaluation system that allows the bulk of educators to go years without a performance review. He makes little secret of his intention to hold teachers more accountable for their students' performance, recently signing his name to a controversial letter in the *Washington Post* attacking the teacher tenure system with other high-profile education leaders, including former Washington, D.C. schools chancellor Michelle Rhee and New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein.

"I'll double someone's salary if I can hold them accountable for their performance," Brizard said, "so long as I can get rid of them if they're not doing their job."

While his reforms have earned him a spot in the national limelight, at times they have been unpopular at home. A survey conducted by the Center for Governmental Research in April showed that only about half of teachers support Brizard's curriculum and assessment system. The group's report speculates that teachers may see the plan as a backward step, or just the latest change a new superintendent is trying to bring to make his mark on the district.

"Quite frankly, his relationship with teachers is hanging by a thread," Urbanski said.

And a recent Voice of the Voter survey of potential voters showed that the public perception of Brizard is fairly lackluster, with 48 percent of respondents giving him a just fair or poor evaluation. About 35 percent said he was doing a good or excellent job, placing his rating behind the mayor and the county executive. Brizard's results were also down from last year, when 43 percent of voters rated his job performance as good or excellent.

Those critics say he puts too much emphasis on data and meeting federal mandates, disconnecting himself from teachers working in the classrooms. Some say he is quick to sign on to the latest education fads, whether or not there is any evidence they are effective. And others interpret his calls to hold teachers more accountable for their students' performance as an attack on the profession.

Among Brizard's harshest critics are some of his bosses on the school board, who regularly criticize and attack his administration during public board meetings, including accusations that they discriminate against black students.

"We have to do a better job holding our superintendents accountable," said board member Cynthia Elliott, who regularly criticizes Brizard. "Some of them get in here thick as thieves running in all these different circles with the other politicians. It's one thing to have all these great ideas. It's another thing to do what's best for children."

For Brizard, the criticism is just part of the job, which will earn him a \$223,600 salary this year. He

The advertisement features the USA TODAY logo at the top left. The main title "AutoPilot" is in large, bold, black font, with a blue airplane icon to its right. Below the title is a smartphone displaying the app's interface, which includes a flight schedule for "USA TODAY Meeting" on Sep 21, 2009, with details for a flight from BNA to IAD, a weather forecast for Washington (D.C.), and a gallery of photos. To the right of the phone, the text reads "The new travel app for iPhone® and iPod touch®". At the bottom right, it says "Presented by: Hampton" with the Hampton logo. A large blue button at the bottom right says "SEE HOW IT WORKS >>".

dismisses some of it as rhetoric from people who mean well, but don't really understand what needs to be done to reform an urban school system.

The superintendent is also bracing for more pushback to controversial changes he has planned for his second term. Brizard said he plans to work with reputable charter school companies to help them open sites in the city, something he believes will provide parents more options and offer competition that should spur the traditional public schools to do better. He also wants to reassign special education students, spreading them out to more of the district schools, something he expects to see protested by the schools and the community.

"The seeds are planted, we're waiting for the flowers to bloom and we're expecting it to be a beautiful harvest," Evans said.

Brizard's reforms could once again be affected by a community debate over who should oversee the city schools, with both supporters and opponents of mayoral control expecting the issue to resurface after the November election.

Brizard has stayed quiet on how he feels about the issue, though Mayor Robert Duffy has said he would have chosen Brizard to stay on with more freedom to implement his reforms than he has under the board.

Brizard says it makes little difference to him who his boss is, so long as they support his aggressive reform agenda.

He says he has spent much of his three years fighting a culture of apathy that persisted in the district and trying to put the people and systems in place to move forward.

Even then, he admits that he wonders whether the City School District, which has a long history of abandoning grand plans, will sustain his reforms in the long run.

"You want to break Humpty Dumpty so no one can put him back together again," he said. "But you do worry it will fall a part as soon as you leave it."