

1 year into job, school superintendent Karam meets goals, gets plaudits from board, teachers union

A PASSING GRADE

BY DANIEL P. BADER

UTICA – When Bruce Karam took over the top job in the Utica School District more than a year ago, he had three major hurdles: the budget, raising test scores and overhauling his administration.

He has accomplished all three with tough decisions. The first and last on that list he started working on right away, deciding to not fill three vacant administration positions and starting work on the budget – which previously wouldn't begin until January or February.

"I think I've accomplished the objectives I've laid out," Karam said. "By getting the budget done early, we were able to take a very long look at what cuts to make."

Ultimately, 10 administrator jobs were slashed, saving the district nearly \$1 million annually, but leaving more work for fewer people.

On top of those hurdles, Karam and other districts in the state had to negotiate complicated and politically sensitive teacher evaluation systems. Karam, his staff and union leadership did, making the area's biggest district one of the only in the area to turn them in on time, and the first to have its system approved.

This year, too, is the rollout of the Common Core Curriculum, which has been described as the biggest change to education in 30 years.

Utica's evaluation system negotiations were wrapped in expired contract negotiations with teachers and principals. He won wage concessions from both,

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BRUCE KARAM — Utica City School District superintendent



TINA RUSSELL / OBSERVER-DISPATCH

This summer, the Utica Board of Education gave a glowing review of Superintendent Bruce Karam's work, giving him rankings of "Always Meets Expectations" and "Far Exceeds Expectations" in 60 separate categories. After his first year, Karam was credited for overcoming three hurdles: managing the budget, raising test scores and overhauling his administration.

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Karam gets plaudits from board, teachers union



TINA RUSSELL / OBSERVER-DISPATCH

Tracey Ralston, stenographer for the Utica City School District, talks to Superintendent Bruce Karam. “The first thing he did was start working on the budget. He knew, he forecasted, where our problems would be,” said Board President Christopher Salatino about Karam. “He had a lot on his plate and he’s done a hell of a job.”

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though the teachers rejected one version of the contract resulting in fewer saved teacher jobs – 60 instead of nearly 90 – and larger class sizes.

Important programs, such as the district’s contribution to the Young Scholars program, were cut, and initially almost two dozen sports teams were on the chopping block. Security positions were curtailed, and an alternative education transition program was cut.

If he could put anything back, it would be teacher jobs.

“If I had the money right now, I’d put all the teachers back,” he said. Karam’s team also negotiated two other contracts – custodians and their supervisors – winning employee-paid contributions to health care from some current and any new hires.

The Board of Education, which picked Karam, a 23-year employee of the district, over nearly a dozen other candidates, voiced its approval.

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“The first thing he did was start working on the budget. He knew, he forecasted, where our problems would be,” Board President Christopher Salatino said. “He had a lot on his plate and he’s done a hell of a job.”

Board Member Evon Ervin agreed, and said she’s heard far fewer rumbles of disagreement or displeasure from the community, staff and teachers than in prior years.

“I think people think they can get to Bruce if things are not handled the way they think they can be done,” she said. “With the last superintendent we heard things all the time.”

It hasn't been easy, Karam said, describing 12- to 14-hour days for him and his staff.

"I've learned that you work hard, you think things through, you do as much preplanning as you can, you stay organized, and when you have a tough decision, you make it," Karam said. "If you can't make that (decision) then you shouldn't be in the job."

Larry Custodero, president of the Utica Teachers Association, said the relationship with Karam has been getting warmer, especially now that Custodero no longer is sidelined with health problems and has been able to meet with Karam in person.

"With one year in, I'd give him a 'B' right now," Custodero said. "Does he cooperate all the time? No. Do I cooperate all the time? No. We're at different ends of the spectrum on some issues."

But the relationship is moving in the right direction, he said, and both sides agree on a number of things, including objections to two charter schools that want to open in Utica next fall.

"We're both trying to get jobs back," Custodero said. "We both agree on that the district needs more money. We're not getting our fair share."

Because so much has changed with how students are tested, and the tests themselves, experts caution to not read too much from changes in recent test scores. Still, in the last year, standardized test scores went up, almost across the board, in math and English for grades 3 through 8.

The board review and the scores qualify Karam for annual and incentive raises – both of which he's not accepting.

"I don't want to take the 1.5 or 2 percent because we just laid off a ton of people," he said. "I don't feel this is the appropriate time."

The budget problems charter schools will bring to the district follow only the budget itself as Karam's top two worries next year. Student growth and achievement is his third worry.

"The problem is in the demographics," he said.

Eight out of 10 Utica students qualify for free and reduced price lunch, a measure of poverty. Many do not speak English as their first language, but are expected to perform on the tests, and more students arrive every year, even though there are fewer teachers.

"Given those factors, we're doing a great job," Karam said. "We are definitely making ground on all fronts."

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