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Testimony Before The New York Senate Finance Committee,
Assembly Ways and Means Committee,
Senate Education Committee,
and
Assembly Education Committee

January 27, 2016

Presented By:
Linda Cimusz
Interim Superintendent
Rochester City School District

Introduction

Thank you for the honor of testifying before you today. My name is Linda Cimusz, and I represent the Rochester City School District as Interim Superintendent. I am a lifelong educator who started as a classroom teacher and served as a building principal at the elementary, middle and high school levels. I have held District leadership positions in Buffalo, Syracuse, and Williamsville New York. I also served as a deputy education commissioner in the state of Texas in the early 1990s.

I came to Rochester at the request of Dan Lowengard, whom many of you know was Superintendent of the Utica and Syracuse City School districts for many years. The Rochester Board of Education hired Mr. Lowengard last fall to serve as Interim Superintendent beginning this month, and he brought me in to help. Unfortunately, a health issue has prevented Mr. Lowengard from continuing his service to Rochester, and I was asked to step in as Interim two weeks ago while the Board continues its search for a long-term Superintendent.

My reason for sharing that background is that it's relevant to my message today.

- As a career educator with experience in other urban districts, my early assessment is that Rochester schools are taking the right steps to improve student achievement. The District is headed in a positive direction.
- As an interim leader I assure you that the Board of Education intends to maintain the priorities and strategies that are working to benefit Rochester children. Our team is doing everything we can to advance the district's progress during the transition.
- I also have learned that financial management is a strength of the Rochester City School District. The district has improved financial stability over the past four years while increasing services to students. We intend to remain good stewards of taxpayer money and to justify our respectful request for additional state investment.

State Support for Rochester Students

Before providing more detail on our District's priorities and needs, I would like to thank the committees—along with Governor Cuomo, our local delegation and your colleagues in the Assembly and Senate—for your ongoing support of public education.

We appreciate the Community Schools Aid proposed in the Governor's budget to address unique challenges faced by urban districts. This funding will help Rochester receivership

schools to maintain important educational programs, some of which are funded by grants that will expire this year. We ask that the legislature support the Governor's full proposal for Community Schools Aid.

I would especially like to thank you for supporting full-day Pre-Kindergarten, in which I am a passionate believer. Rochester Pre-K programs serve 95 percent of the city's eligible four-year-olds, and this is the second school year in which more than 90 percent attend full-day programs. On January 4th we began serving more than 650 **three**-year-olds in full-day Pre-Kindergarten, thanks to an $11.9 million expansion grant, the largest in the state. We plan to serve more than 1,000 three-year-olds in full-day Pre-Kindergarten in the next school year; the District's ultimate goal is to offer full-day Pre-K to every three- and four-year-old in the city. We appreciate Governor Cuomo's newly proposed initiative to increase Pre-K for three-year-olds, which will help us to achieve that goal. Early education is an essential component of our strategy to help Rochester students to read on grade level by third grade. Education research and my career experience show that no strategy benefits urban children more than a strong focus on early literacy.

On behalf of the Rochester Board of Education I also want to thank the legislature and Governor for enacting Phase 2 of our Facilities Modernization Plan. Ten Rochester schools have been modernized or have renovations underway as part of Phase 1. We appreciate the support of our local delegation and other state leaders in authorizing up to $435 million to continue modernizing Rochester schools in Phase 2. Last night we conducted the second of four public meetings to gather input for our updated Phase 2 modernization plan. While planning to create better learning environments in many of our buildings, the Board of Education has also closed four schools in the past four years and authorized closure of at least two more in the next four years. This illustrates my point that the Rochester district is a good steward of taxpayer dollars. While using state aid to modernize facilities, the district is making the difficult decisions required to right-size its facility footprint.

District Action Plan

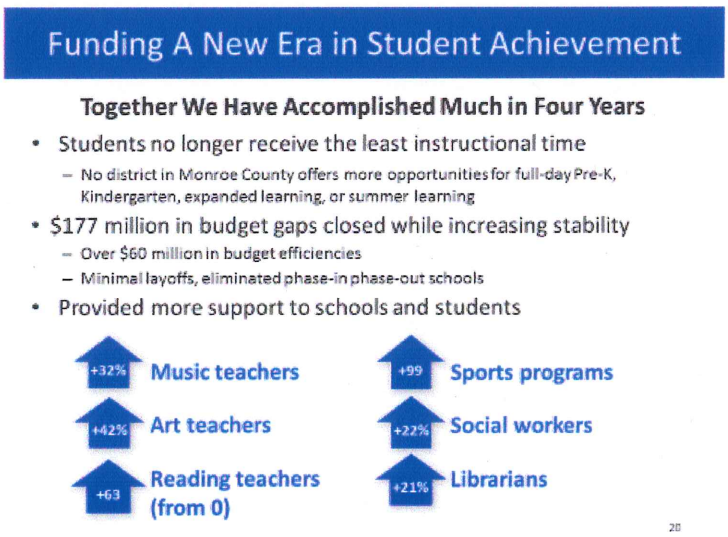
I have attached to my written testimony a copy of the District's Action Plan to improve student achievement from 2014 to 2018. It is based on the theory that Rochester children can and will succeed if we mitigate poverty by giving them the extra time and support they need.

Under this plan the District has identified three academic priorities—helping Rochester students to read on grade level by third grade; providing them more and better learning time; and delivering excellent instruction. Along with strategies to support each of these academic goals, the plan defines actions to improve student attendance and school climate. There are major community initiatives underway to achieve both of these objectives by engaging students, families and community partners.

The plan calls for colleges or other outside organizations to lead individual schools, and this year the University of Rochester began managing East High—the district's largest school—as an Educational Partnership Organization. Career and technical education is a component of the plan being realized at Edison Tech high school, which opened this year as a newly unified school with a new leadership team and career pathways developed in collaboration with the Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council.

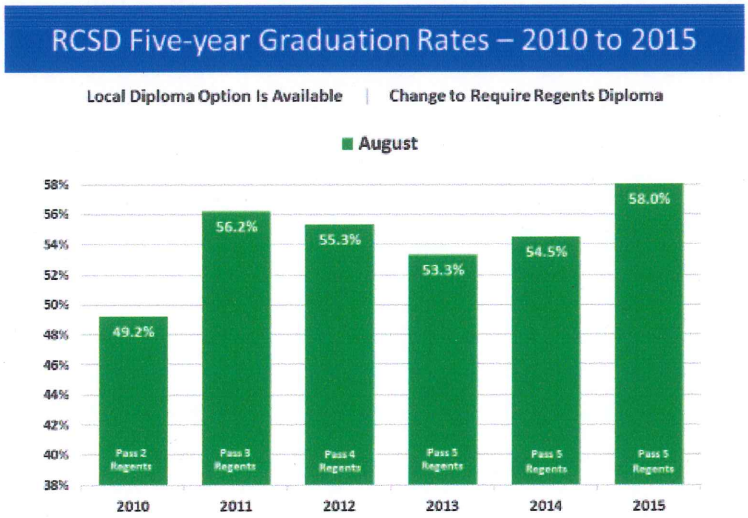
Effective and efficient allocation of resources is the District's number two priority, which reflects the close relationship between resources and achievement. Over the past four years, the District has deliberately and transparently shifted more than $60 million in resources away from functions that do not directly benefit students toward services and supports that will help them succeed.

- Hiring significantly more classroom teachers, social workers, and librarians
- Adding instructional time through universal full-day Pre-K, 13 expanded learning schools and summer learning opportunities for 12,500 students last July and August.
- Supporting major increases in art, music and sports programs
    - Increasing the number of reading teachers in schools from zero in 2012 to more than 60 today
    - Distributing hundreds of thousands of books for students to take home each year



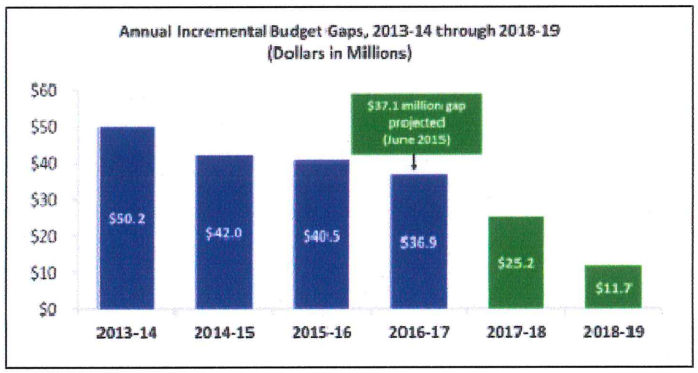
- Providing other resources that support students and schools

These actions are beginning to pay a return on investment for Rochester students. Full-day Pre-K and the expanded-learning schedules at elementary schools are popular with our families. School attendance increased significantly in elementary grades—1,104 fewer elementary students were chronically absent in 2014-15 compared to the previous year.



Graduation rates, while far too low, are on the increase. Data released by the state last month show that Rochester's five-year graduation rate in 2015 was 58 percent. That's a 3.5 percent increase compared to the previous year and the highest rate in six years. The four-year graduation rate for students with disabilities increased 2.1% compared to the previous year, continuing a four-year improvement trend from 18.7% in 2012 to 28.8% in 2015. The graduation rate for students with limited English proficiency increased 3.1% compared to 2014, though it remains too low at 20.6%.

We are focused on improving both four- and five-year graduation rates. A high-school diploma is no less valuable if it takes a student extra time to meet higher standards. We want to encourage and applaud their perseverance.



At the same time it has increased investment in student achievement, the Rochester City School District has reduced its structural budget gap by more than 25 percent—from more than $50 million three years ago to a projected $36.9 million in 2016-17. The District has identified more than $60 million in budget efficiencies over the past four years and shifted resources to increase direct student support.

I am working closely with the Board of Education, our Deputy Superintendents, new Chief Financial Officer Lauren Poehlman and the District financial team to continue the current path—increased investment in students while reducing annual budget gaps and achieving long-term financial stability over time.

Our 2016-17 Budget Challenge

Our district faces significant challenges to meet growing costs for employee compensation and for the expansion of charter schools, which currently educate 14 percent of Rochester students. Last month, our Board of Education reviewed a projected $41.9 million budget challenge in 2016-17. This includes a $36.9 million budget gap driven by the expansion of charter schools, contractual salary increases and employee benefit costs.

While closing this $36.9 million gap, we intend to shift an additional $5 million in resources to improve student achievement. Our leadership team is meeting with school Principals this week to discuss how best to allocate that investment. Some of the ideas we are discussing include staff additions at certain secondary schools, increasing the number of summer jobs the District funds for our students, and equipment purchases to improve art, music, and sports opportunities for our students. Dr. Christiana Otuwa, our Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning, also is leading a comprehensive review of alternative school programs—those serving students who are not experiencing success in a traditional school environment for a variety of reasons.

Funding Request to State

As we thank you for continued strong support of Rochester schools through the Community Schools Aid program, there are three specific areas in which we must request additional help—receivership schools, student transportation, and school nursing services.

I will address the receivership issue first. For background purposes I should explain that during the 2014-15 school year I served as Chief Academic Officer of the Buffalo Public Schools. In that capacity I oversaw initial implementation of the Education Transformation Act of 2015, better known as the receivership law. As committee members know well, the law requires certain low-performing schools to meet improvement targets within one or two years. Superintendents are given some extra unilateral authority as a receiver to implement changes in

these schools, and districts will be required to appoint outside receivers for schools that do not meet their targets.

As someone well versed in the law's requirements, I am impressed with the work Rochester schools are doing to help struggling schools improve rapidly. All of Rochester's 14 receivership schools have a state-approved improvement plan in place, which includes the EPO agreement with the University of Rochester at East High School. All deadlines for forming community engagement teams, conducting hearings and developing the plans have been met. Eight of the nine receivership schools that serve elementary students had met the requirement for additional learning time before the new law took effect. New Principals have been appointed at 10 of the 14 schools within the past two school years.

In short, I can assure you that the Rochester City School District is taking the receivership law seriously and working aggressively to help struggling schools improve. However, the new law's mandates will add to our budget challenge if we do not receive additional help. This year, Rochester's four schools on the "persistently struggling" list received state aid to boost their ability to meet specified targets. The 10 Rochester schools classified as "struggling" have similar needs to add resources that support their students, especially those that no longer receive School Improvement Grant support. Our struggling schools would benefit from receivership aid in 2016-17 applied using the same funding formula used to support the persistently struggling schools.

In addition, we respectfully request additional state help to address rising transportation costs. We would like to fund a pilot project beginning next year that would enable our district to provide universal transportation, which we believe will reduce transportation costs over time while supporting neighborhood schools.

Currently, the state pays 90 percent of transportation costs for students, but only if they travel more than 1.5 miles to school. This policy provides an incentive for parents to enroll their children in schools outside their neighborhoods. During the current school year, only 17 percent of Rochester elementary-school students on average attend their neighborhood school. Only 14 percent on average attend the K-to-8 school in their neighborhood. If Rochester had flexibility to bus students less than 1.5 miles, more families would choose neighborhood schools.

The Rochester pilot project, being led by Deputy Superintendent for Administration Adele Bovard, would provide universal transportation to students in all of our district's

elementary and K-to-8 schools next year. We would expand it to secondary schools in the following year, allowing every student to receive transportation to the school that is closest to home if they want it.

The pilot project would support the Safe Neighborhoods objective of the Rochester Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative. As the percentage of neighborhood students increases in each school, routing patterns become more efficient and we believe that rising transportation costs will be reduced over time. Our team is analyzing data now and will follow up with a formal funding request in the near future. We would appreciate your support in our effort to make neighborhood schools the rule rather than the exception for most Rochester families.

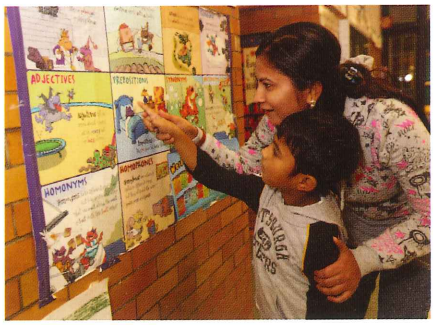
Finally, I would like to request $2 million to maintain school nursing services in Rochester schools at the current level. For the past two years the legislature has generously supported a request for $1.2 million over the Governor's proposed budget for nursing services. This has allowed our district to maintain full-time staffing in the student health office of every Rochester city school with oversight by a registered nurse. Rising contractual and employee costs will increase the incremental cost of maintaining this service next year by $800,000. Our school nurses play an exceptionally valuable role in helping our children stay healthy, and the demand for student health services is increasing each year. We respectfully request an additional $2 million over the Governor's proposed budget to maintain nursing services for our students.

Conclusion

Thank you for supporting the students of the Rochester City School District. We intend to advance student achievement as we continue to drive efficiencies within the District budget. The additional funding we are requesting today would be used to meet specific costs associated with supporting receivership schools, strengthening neighborhood schools through improved transportation and maintaining school nursing services.

I appreciate the chance today to report on our efforts and express the needs of the children in Rochester schools. Thank you.

We Will Treat Every Child Like One of Our Own

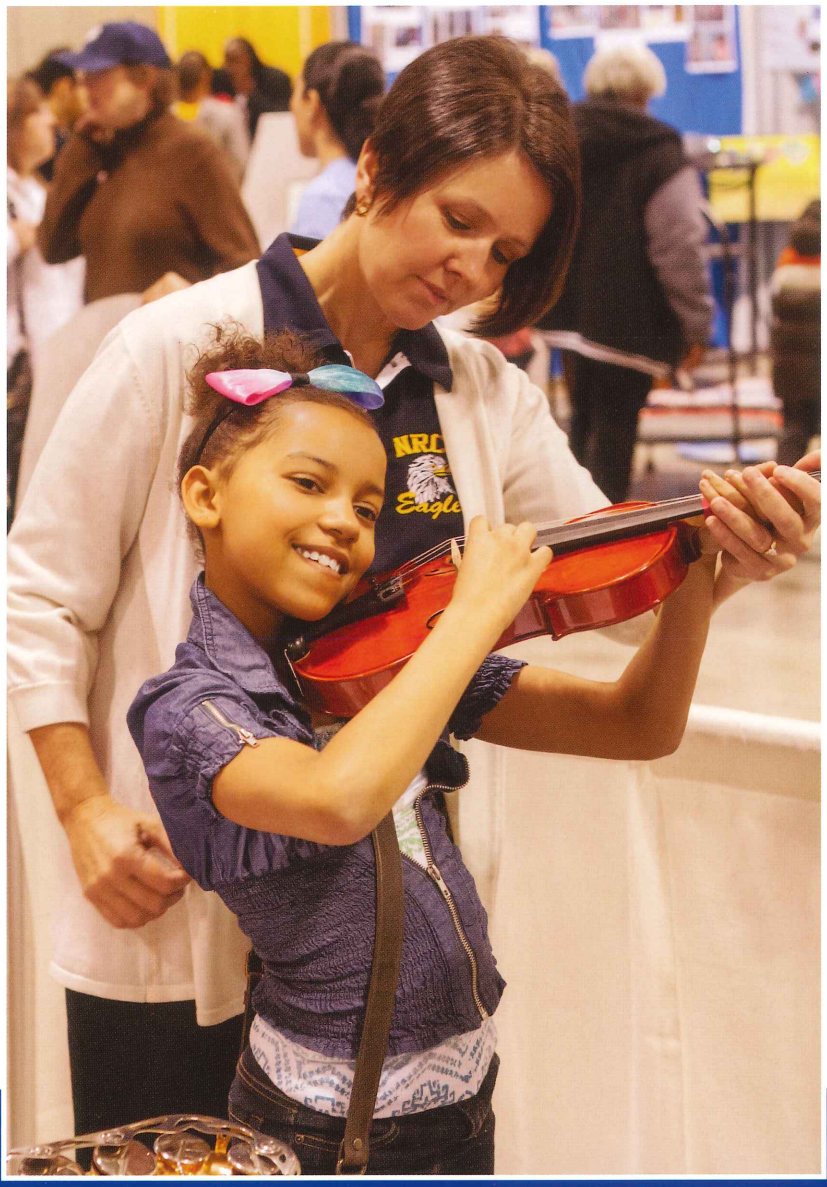


An Action Plan for the Rochester City School District

2014-2018

March 2014

We Are the Rochester



Our Mission

To provide a quality education that ensures our students graduate with the skills to be successful in the global economy.

Our Challenge

We know that every child has the desire and potential to succeed. We cannot provide all of our students a stable home or supportive neighborhood. But we can provide schools where they are surrounded by caring adults who give them the time, love, and support they need. We will treat every child like one of our own.

City School District

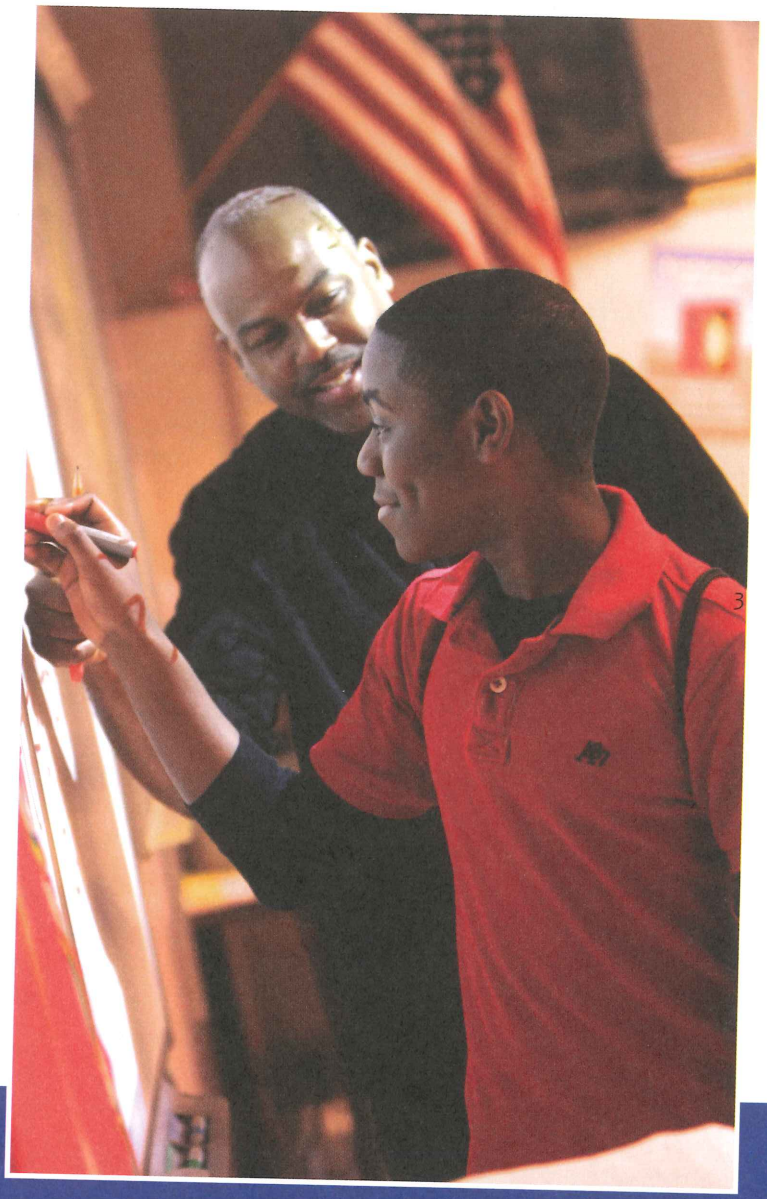
Our Vision

Every child is a work of art.

Create a masterpiece.

Our Priorities

- Student Achievement and Growth
- Effective and Efficient Allocation of Resources
- Communication and Customer Service
- Parent, Family, and Community Involvement
- Management Systems



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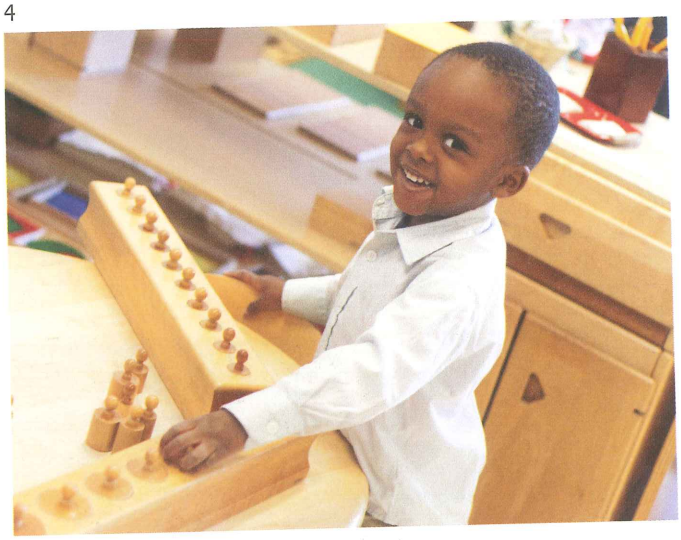


Introduction

Rochester's students and families urgently need better educational outcomes. Our district ranks at or near the bottom statewide in student achievement, with some of the lowest test scores and graduation rates. Yet we have excellent staff members, many students who persevere and succeed, and some excellent schools. Our challenge is to make success more widespread and immediate. All of our schools must provide a certain path out of poverty for our children and serve as an asset to our city's vitality.

Over the past 25 years, under seven different Superintendents, billions of dollars have been spent on different approaches to improving student achievement and school performance. We have tried creating middle schools, then eliminating them, shifting grade configurations, opening schools with specific themes, creating small schools-within-schools, phasing out low-performing schools and creating new schools in their place. We have used six different curricular programs to support English Language Arts instruction in the past 12 years.

These past reforms have caused instability and upheaval for students, families and staff. Unfortunately, none of them has improved outcomes. Rochester students fail to perform as well as students in New York's other "Big 5" districts with similar demographics. Of our 54 schools, 35 are designated as Priority or Focus schools in 2013-14—the lowest 5 or 10 percent statewide in student achievement. As a result, city families seek alternatives to District schools for their children. Some relocate to the suburbs. Others choose charter schools. Since 2006-07, the number of students enrolling in charter schools has more than quadrupled to more than 3,200, or 11% of our total enrollment. Three new charter schools will open in 2014-15, increasing the enrollment loss to 4,110 students. Our community is running out of patience, and we are running out of time before the state will enforce its own solutions.

Poverty presents terrible challenges, but it cannot be an excuse. Rochester students are as smart and talented as students anywhere in the world, with just as much potential. We must use the District's resources to mitigate poverty, giving our students the time and support they need to succeed.

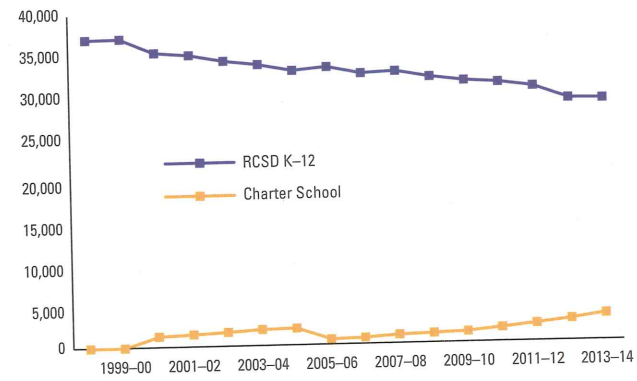
The answer is not to develop a new strategic plan at this time, replacing the 2008-2013 document through a process that would delay progress and create instability. Rather, it is imperative to focus and finish execution of the key strategies we have identified. We have laid out worthwhile strategies to improve our schools. They focus on the fundamentals, such as getting children to read on grade level by 3rd grade, making sure they attend school every day, and closing the opportunity gap. These fundamental strategies are supported by our key District priorities:

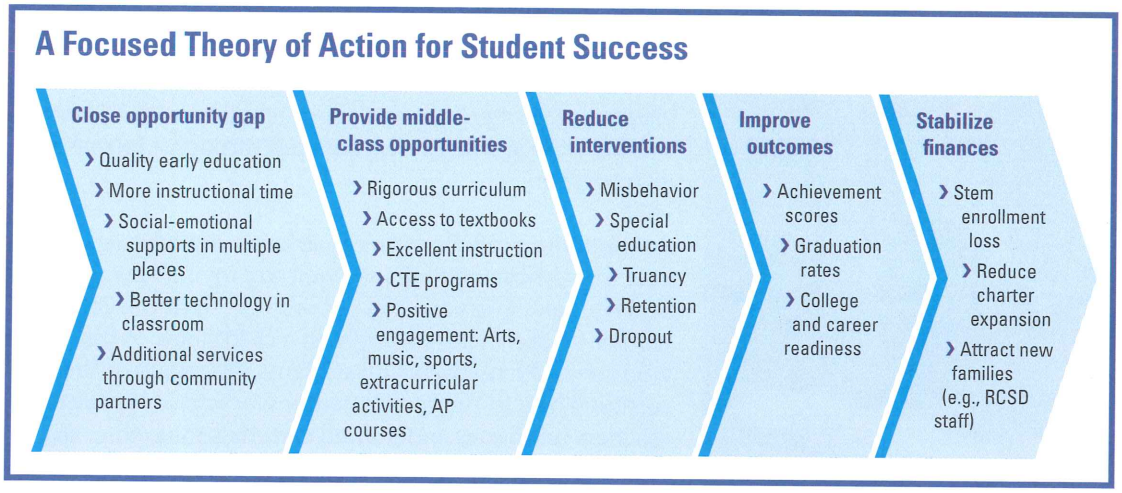
- Student Achievement and Growth
- Effective, Efficient Allocation of Resources
- Communication and Customer Service
- Parent, Family, and Community Involvement
- Management Systems

Our Superintendent is accountable to the Board of Education for achieving measurable progress in each of these priority areas. They provide a manageable list to guide the work of our organization, derived from the strategic plan's 14 objectives, 40 sub-strategies and 199 tactical recommendations. This Action Plan, developed through three years of consultation with the community, parents, the Board of Education, teachers and administrative leaders, outlines the focused actions that will allow our District to advance these priorities and provide the quality schools our community needs.

While recognizing an urgent need to improve, **we must work to maintain stability for students, families, and staff** to the great-

Over the past 15 years, RCSD K–12 enrollment has decreased by 8,002 students (-22%)





Our theory of action is grounded in the belief that all children can succeed if we give students and staff the time, opportunities and support they need.

est extent possible. That is why we have stopped phasing out low-performing schools and slowed the conversion to K-8 schools. Equity requires us to focus on providing students in all schools a better experience—creating a District of continuous improvement, rather than a few islands of opportunity.

The time to act is now. We must stop believing that poverty makes our mission impossible, or waiting for increased government funding to get the job done. Using the resources we have, **we must transform our District culture to one of setting and achieving high expectations.** Adults in the Rochester City School District must treat our students as they would want their own children to be treated.

Our Theory of Action

Poverty is a fact for most of the families we serve. A December 2013 report from the Rochester Area Community Foundation found that Rochester has the fifth highest poverty level in the nation. We rank third among the top 100 cities for the concentration of extremely poor neighborhoods. As a result, too many of our children come to school hungry, troubled and unprepared.

Poverty presents terrible challenges, but it cannot be an excuse. Rochester students are as smart and talented as students anywhere in the world, with just as much potential. We must use the District's resources to mitigate poverty, giving our students the time and support they need to succeed.

We cannot give every student a stable, nurturing home or a safe, supportive neighborhood. However, we can provide schools that use every available tool to engage students in positive activities and supportive relationships with caring adults. We must create a climate where students treat their peers and the adults at school with respect. This will allow far greater numbers of children to learn at high levels. More students will graduate ready to be productive citizens, with the skills to succeed in college and careers.

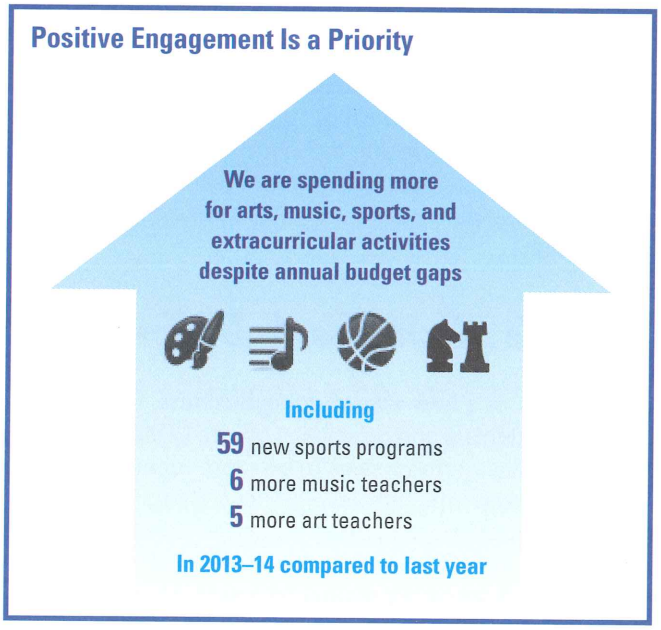
We can close the opportunity gap that puts low-income students at such a disadvantage, through key initiatives including:

- Quality early education
- Increased instructional time
- Effective social-emotional supports in multiple places in schools and the community

Then, we provide our students the same educational opportunities available to many middle-class families:

- Rigorous curriculum
- Access to quality textbooks, literature, manipulatives and other supplies
- Excellent instruction
- Positive engagement opportunities, including arts, music, sports and other extracurricular activities.

Economically, providing middle-class engagement opportunities is a matter of social justice. Strategically, it is part of our **prevention strategy**. Art, music, and sports provide essential physical and emotional outlets for children.



Our successful students often tell us that participating in the activities they love—whether it's a football team, school play, science club, or choral group—gives them the motivation to attend school and work hard in their classes. Providing these activities helps us to meet the social and emotional needs of every student.

As part of our strategy, each school will have a student support team to identify and serve children who need additional social or emotional support. **In the 2014-15 budget, we will invest an additional $1.3 million to ensure that every school has at least one full-time social worker, along with the many other in-school supports already in place.** A small percentage of students need more intensive services than schools alone can provide. Our support teams will provide case management to connect these students to the outside services they need and track their progress.

What is the payback on positive engagement?

In 2013-14, our District will spend $7.7 million on safety and security in schools, $11 million on grade retention, and $24.2 million on school programs for students who need an alternative to traditional high school. Security costs have more than doubled since 2004-05, and alternative program costs are three times higher—while music, art and sports were being cut over the same period. The prevention strategy is an investment in reversing these trends, allowing our District to shift resources from retention and intervention services to classroom education and positive outlets for our children.

How We Must Work Differently

Success requires a new way of doing business, from school receptionists and principals' offices to classrooms to Central Office. It requires us to be more focused on our customers—students, families, District colleagues and the broader community—and more proactive rather than reactive about meeting their needs. We are working daily to change the culture of our district to one that is responsive, accountable and disciplined.

Responsive: We expect staff members to respond to requests or concerns from our customers within 48 hours. Wegmans' world-renowned approach to excellent customer service is being shared with our staff through a formal training program.

Accountable: Staff members at all levels must be accountable for performing their jobs well and for improving student achievement. Everyone can play a role—from the cafeteria worker whose smile can brighten a child's day, to the painter who can make teachers and students feel proud of their surroundings, to the service center workers who provide teachers textbooks and printed materials to do their crucial work. Accountability means rigorous evaluations not only for teachers and principals, but for every employee. It also requires us to shift resources to fund our priorities through the budget process.

Disciplined: Rather than flip-flopping names and themes and grade configurations, we must maintain focus on improving the schools we have. Between 2008 and 2011, the District started the phase-out of eight high schools and one elementary school; started the phase-in of five new high schools and one elementary school; and redesigned six schools by grade level or program. Instead of constantly changing school structures, we must maintain stability and continuity as much as possible. With relentless focus on our priorities, we can improve educational outcomes for children throughout our City.

District Priorities and Strategies

Student Achievement

In 2012-13, just 5% of our 3rd-through-8th graders demonstrated proficiency in the Common Core-based assessment in English Language Arts and Math. Our four-year graduation rate stands at 49%. Performance is especially low among African American students, Hispanic students, males, and English Language Learners. For the 2008 cohort, the graduation rate for students with disabilities was a shockingly low 19%. We face no more urgent task than to improve programs and services so that more students learn at higher levels.

How do we do it? First, by focusing our efforts. In the summer and fall of 2013, we convened dozens of the District's top instructional leaders in a facilitated process to determine which academic priorities provide the greatest promise for driving significant, lasting improvement in our top District priority—student achievement and growth. We then created cross-functional teams to support each priority—more and better learning time, reading by 3rd grade, and instructional excellence. These teams are led by district and school personnel with support from community partners. **These teams are accountable for setting and achieving improvement targets. Through the budget process, we are purposefully shifting resources to support them.**

Spotlight Summer Learning Loss

Goal: Prevent our youngest students from losing critical skills and knowledge over the summer by offering enriched, literacy-focused programs.

Timetable: Extend program to all pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade students by summer 2014.

Status: Program and funding requirements will be included in 2014-15 budget

Our Top Three Academic Priorities to Drive Improved Achievement

1. **More and Better Learning Time:** The traditional school calendar (180 days of instruction, 6.3 hours per day) holds time constant and leaves the amount of learning as a variable. In high-poverty districts like Rochester, students need more time and support than students in higher-income districts, where most families are able to provide higher levels of support at home. Yet before the 2013-14 school year, Rochester students received the least instructional time of any group of students in Monroe County and were among the lowest in the nation.

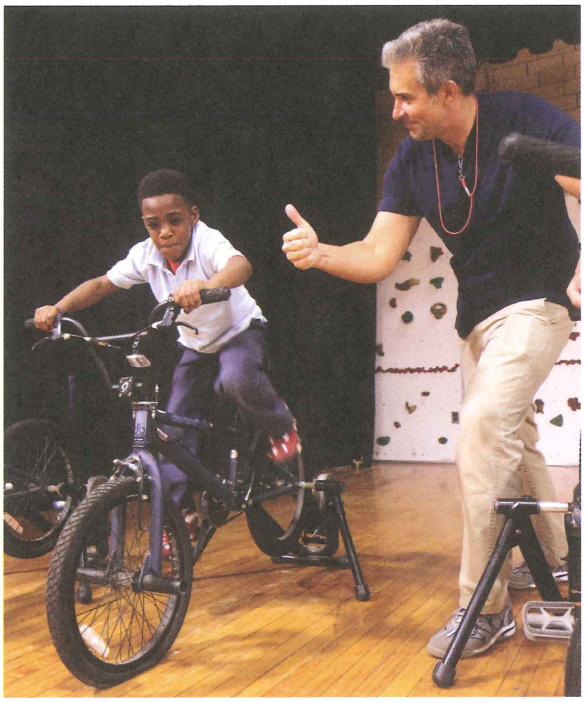
   To improve achievement, we are varying time in school to make student learning and growth a constant. We are increasing instructional time in multiple ways.

   - This year, the District eliminated the 50-year practice of early dismissal on Wednesdays, which adds more than 29 hours of instructional time—nearly a full week of school—for all students over the course of a year.
   - Buses are now required to arrive at least 15 minutes before bell time, so that students can be ready for instruction when the day begins.
   - We've also added 200 hours of optional instruction time at 13 extended learning schools. Funded primarily by School Improvement Grants, these schools provide extra academic support to students who sign up, along with extracurricular activities.
   - We've added 300 hours of instructional time at five expanded learning schools (Schools 9, 10, 23, 45, 46). These communities engaged in a collaborative, year-long process to rethink their schedules around a longer school day. They provide more development and planning time for teachers, with more academic support and enrichment activities for students, delivered in partnership with community-based organizations.

   Taken together, these changes are increasing learning time by 18% to 30%. In the 2014-15 school year, we intend to provide expanded schedules at up to seven more schools. We are seeing evidence that expanded learning time boosts achievement. Early results indicate higher student growth, improved attendance, better student/teacher relationships, and fewer behavior problems at our expanded learning schools. In the 2012-13 school year, our first school with an expanded schedule—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School No. 9—achieved academic growth among the highest in the district, despite serving a student population that is among the most challenged.

   We are also working aggressively to reduce summer learning loss. This problem is well-documented in studies and especially harmful to low-income students, who lose about a month's worth of math skills and two months in reading every July and August. **We served more than 10,000 students last summer, and we intend to make Rochester a leader at reducing summer learning loss through multiple efforts.**

   - We are increasing summer enrichment activities to accelerate achievement. That means offering city children the same kinds of fun, safe, and educational group activities that middle-class families take for granted in the summer. One example is the Horizons Summer Enrichment Program, which has provided best-practice support to students for more than 20 years, with help from businesses and the broader community. Another is the Summer Scholars program funded by the Wallace Foundation, which will provide enriched learning for about 700 rising fourth-graders this summer as part of a national study on ways to curb learning loss. More than 2,000 District students received summer enrichment through programs like these in 2013, and we intend to grow this number in future years.
   - In July and August of 2014, we will offer additional summer reading opportunities to every student who will be entering kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, or 3rd grade next year. This is an investment in achieving the goal of helping students read on grade level by 3rd grade.



- Expanded partnerships with City government to increase summer reading. In 2013, 11 high-achieving juniors and seniors had summer jobs as literacy aides, working in city libraries to help younger children enjoy books and sharpen their literacy skills. We plan to expand that program and collaborate with the City in other ways to promote reading during summer break.

2. **Reading by 3rd Grade:** A critical factor in successful completion of high school is being able to read proficiently by 3rd grade. Why? Repeated research has shown that students must learn to read well by grade 3 in order to shift from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. **Students who cannot read on grade level by 3rd grade are four times less likely to graduate; if they are poor, that rises to 13 times less likely.**

   We are pursuing a four-part strategy to increase the numbers of 3rd graders who can read well:

   - Enroll all four-year-olds in quality pre-kindergarten, with full-day programs for as many students as possible. In February 2014, more than 820 students shifted from a half-day to a full-day program thanks to a $5.9 million state expansion grant. More than 70% of pre-kindergarten students now attend for a full day, and our intent is to grow that percentage.
   - Provide summer programs to reverse the historic pattern of learning loss for all students in pre-k through 3rd grades. We will continue to strengthen our relationship with Horizons and other community partnerships for expanded summer learning opportunities.
   - Work with teachers to improve delivery of the Common Core literacy curriculum. Smart Notebooks are supporting K-2 ELA teachers with interactive lessons in English and Spanish.

We will get children ready for college and careers when we achieve our goal of teaching them to read on grade level by third grade.

   - Increase the capacity of educators to use assessment data to target instruction to the skills students are struggling to master.

3. **Instructional Excellence:** Classroom instruction is the heart of what we do, and the poor achievement of our students requires us to do better. The Common Core instructional program provides an opportunity. Teachers, administrators and families must collaborate to help students learn new material and achieve higher expectations. We have invested significantly in professional learning to begin the process, sending hundreds of staff members to intensive workshops in Albany and providing more than 16,000 hours of professional learning devoted to Common Core instruction before fully implementing the curriculum in 2013-14. We also invested in more than 100 instructional and technology coaches this year to support roll-out of the curriculum.

   Our cross-functional team is focused on sharing best practices in the classroom and using data to target instruction. We are identifying demonstration classrooms. We are also training Principals in how to recognize excellent instruction and guide teacher development towards that goal. In addition, linked to the Reading by 3rd Grade team, we are working to help teachers across the district use formative assessment data to guide their instruction. We are beginning to see signs that focusing on Common Core instruction will improve student learning. **In the January 2014 Regents examinations, more students took the Comprehensive English and Integrated Algebra exams than the previous year, and pass rates were higher.**

Additional Strategies to Improve Student Achievement

Arts, music, sports and extracurricular activities: In the past, these offerings were viewed as "extras" that were often first on the chopping block when budgets were cut. We have shifted our thinking to one that recognizes them as essential investments in closing the opportunity gap. These activities help keep students positively engaged in school and with their peers. They also contribute to parent engagement, providing positive reasons for parents to visit and participate in their child's school. We've added opportunities in all these areas, including the creation of 59 new sports programs.

Consistent time for core instruction: No matter where a student attends school in our district, he or she should

Spotlight Career and Technical Education

Goal: Successfully prepare high school students for technical careers by restoring the quality and prominence of CTE programs, particularly at the Edison campus.

Timetable: Begin making improvements in fall 2014.

Status: We are moving immediately to implement industry assessments and accelerate state approval of CTE programs. Leadership and governance changes are under consideration.

count on receiving the same quality and time for instruction in core academic subjects, along with CTE, art, music and physical education. To make that a reality, we instituted a new master schedule District-wide in the 2013-14 school year. The implementation wasn't perfect, but we needed a new approach to address inconsistencies and shortfalls in previous scheduling at the school level.

- Many elementary schools offered little or no instruction in science and social studies.
- Some elementary schools offered music instruction but no art; others offered art with no music.
- Hundreds of high-school courses were not aligned with the rigor of the state Regents curriculum.

The new schedule ensures consistent instructional time in all subjects at every elementary school. **In the next school year, we will build on this foundation by ensuring every school has at least one full-time music teacher, and by maintaining all extra-curricular music programs.** At the high school level, we will ensure that all classes meet Regents requirements and work to increase the availability of Advanced Placement courses. Our five expanded-day schools manage their schedules internally, meeting or exceeding the time requirements of the master schedule. Our goal is to return more scheduling flexibility and control to the school level District-wide over time.

Career and technical education: Over the next five years, employers in our region will need to fill about 15,000 jobs in career paths that don't require a four-year college degree. Opportunities for these jobs are being promoted by the Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council, representing major local employers in Rochester. Rochester was once a leader in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs to help students obtain jobs like these, particularly at the renowned Edison Tech High School.

Unfortunately, we now offer city school students fewer career education opportunities than suburban students receive through BOCES. Only 7 of our 18 CTE programs are approved by the New York State Education Department. Graduates of approved programs get a technical endorsement on their diplomas that can help them to land a job. Rochester students who graduate from one of our CTE-focused high schools, on the Edison campus, typically receive 200 hours less career instruction than their counterparts in BOCES programs. None of our students last year took the technical assessments that should be routine at the completion of a CTE program. In fact, it appears that many students who take part in CTE programs may not even be properly recorded as doing so.

A thorough evaluation of District CTE offerings by the Career and Technical Education Technical Assistance Center of New York State is complete. We are moving immediately on some recommendations and exploring longer-term solutions to provide CTE programs that are once again as good or better as any in the community.

Special education: Similarly, we plan to overhaul our approach to educating children with disabilities. Just 19% of students with disabilities in the 2008 cohort graduated from high school with their class (by August of 2012), compared to 47% statewide. Only 3% graduated with a Regents diploma. Another 38% of the class dropped out, and the same proportion was still in school. These results reflect an outdated approach to providing special education services that is not meeting the needs of our students and families. We are moving aggressively to implement the practices that are achieving far better results in other "Big 5" districts and suburban schools. This requires us to change the way students are evaluated and classified, along with the way we deliver services.

Effective, Efficient Allocation of Resources

We must use resources wisely to fund our priorities in a time of declining revenues. We also need a budget *process* that provides stability—ending the tradition of yo-yo budgeting, laying off and rehiring staff every summer, which has created uncertainty for students, families, staff members and the entire community every year. We have made progress finding efficiencies throughout the organization—identifying $51.8 million in operational efficiencies over the past three years. An example is our shift to school-based tutoring, which is serving twice as many students with more learning time at lower cost. The Spending Money Smartly project, funded through the Gates Foundation and a New York State Efficiency Grant, is greatly improving our ability to produce sophisticated, long-term budget forecasts and target resources to priorities.

Effective, Efficient Management Team: This ongoing, cross-functional team will work to prioritize expenditures that benefit students and reduce or eliminate those that don't.

Two areas where we have found efficiencies away from the classroom are health care and facilities. By becoming self-insured for health care in 2011, we have saved more than $7 million every year. We also must match our physical space to declining enrollment. As part of the Facilities Modernization Plan, we have closed some school buildings that are no longer needed and reduced the use of leased space. Over time, we will generate significant savings by aligning the space we use with our needs.

Neighborhood School pilot program: In 2013-14, we will spend $52.4 million on transportation, 7% of our entire budget. Our school choice policy is a factor. Many parents choose schools further away from home in order to get bus service.

Having children attend high-quality neighborhood schools will help us to reduce transportation costs while improving instructional systems. **Neighborhood schools serve as lighthouses—they help families connect with each other in the neighborhood, raise property values and instill community pride.**

If most children attend schools close to where they live, we can afford to bus more students to school without increasing transportation costs. To demonstrate this, we are planning a pilot program in 2014-15 that will bus most or all students from one neighborhood to their neighborhood school. In the following year, we hope to expand the pilot with the passage of state legislation that supports transportation to neighborhood schools.

Communication and Customer Service

We must instill throughout our district the notion that students and families are our customers. Our District exists to serve them. We must engage them and the broader community meaningfully and respectfully in the important work we do together.

School orientation: The start of a school year is a critical time to establish expectations and begin to build or reinforce relationships. Back-to-school orientation events are standard in most districts but they were a rarity in Rochester until we began requiring them in 2012. We must continually improve these events and look for other ways to engage families with school.

Listening and responding to stakeholders: We have set expectations in several ways for effective, two-way communication. They include a 48-hour response to questions and concerns from parents, and twice-a-month Coffee & Conversation meetings where parents and community members can bring issues directly to the Superintendent. Beginning in 2013, we used new methods to gather input on the proposed budget, including a dedicated phone line and email account. We now hold Budget Open House events where top leaders explain District finances and listen to feedback that, in turn, will influence budget decisions. In the future, we will experiment with more ideas using technology to make participation easier.

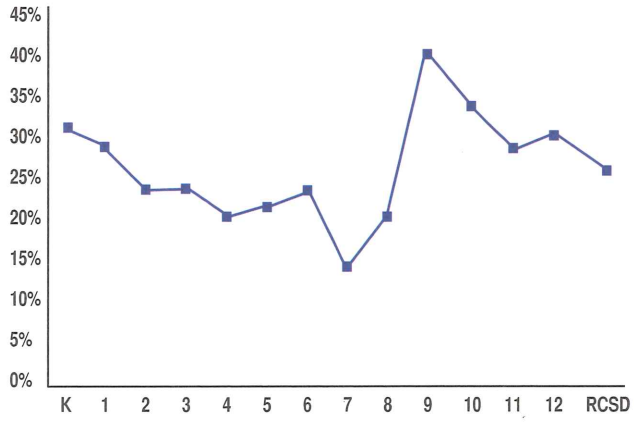
Customer service: We are learning from the best: Wegmans has trained our top leaders in their approach to working with customers, and they are passing it on to employees throughout the district. School secretaries are just one of the key groups that are learning to "be the very best at serving the needs of our customers," as Wegmans puts it. We are indebted to the Wegmans organization for sharing their expertise and human resources to support our efforts.

Parent, Family and Community Involvement

Students cannot excel without the support and active engagement of families and the broader community. All adults can help to educate our children in a variety of ways.

Student attendance: On any given day, about 3,000 city students are absent from school. More than 7,000 students are chronically absent—missing 18 or more days, or 10% of the school year or higher. Research shows a direct

More than 7,500 District students are chronically absent. Students who miss 18 or more days (10% of the school year) are far more likely to struggle and drop out.



link between attendance and achievement. Students with good or excellent attendance are likely to achieve well and graduate. Chronically absent students are far more likely to struggle academically, engage in misbehavior and drop out.

Attendance habits are formed at an early age, which is why we are targeting our improvement efforts on elementary schools. When a kindergartner or 2nd grader regularly misses school, it's not the student's problem—it's a community issue that requires us to better engage parents. We have led a community response to this critical issue, bringing the City of Rochester, the United Way, Monroe County and many other community resources together with an outside consultant. Most significantly, we are appealing to families and other adults in the lives of our students to help us in this effort. We are implementing best practices for getting more children to school.

We are training staff in how to carefully monitor attendance, intervene quickly and follow through, linking students and families to needed community services. Community volunteers, including employees at Central Office, make home visits to students not attending school. When we began in 2012-13 with 4 schools, average daily attendance increased from 88% to 90%, even as we improved record-keeping of attendance so that students were no longer automatically recorded as "present." We are now focusing on 8 schools and will focus on improved attendance as an essential goal.

Student conduct: It's a sad fact that most young people in Rochester have been affected by violence. Too often we read headlines about students or former students who have been seriously hurt or killed by violent crimes.

Tragedies like these have multiple victims—the families and friends who lose a loved one, the community that feels less safe, and the perpetrators. They have lost the hope that education should provide, succumbing to life on the streets. **We need a community-wide initiative to combat youth violence and other forms of misbehavior.** That is why we are convening a task force setting community-wide standards for how we expect young people to behave.

Similar to efforts in Denver, Buffalo and Baltimore, this group—coordinated by an experienced facilitator—will recommend improvements to our disciplinary approach and help set a new code of conduct for young people. This process will be led by the Board of Education and we will engage all stakeholders—including students, parents, social service organizations, law enforcement, the faith community, teachers and administrators.

Student violence and disrespectful behavior does not occur in schools alone and cannot be solved by schools independently. Our entire community, starting with students and parents, must agree on what constitutes proper behavior. Then we must work together to ensure those standards of behavior are met.

Spotlight ◀ Community Task Force on Student Behavior

Goal: Develop a community-wide approach to combating violence, disrespect and misbehavior by youth.

Timetable: Task force will work for a year to develop solutions by spring 2015

Status: Task force members will be appointed in March.

Supporting literacy: Parents and the community are essential parts of our reading-by-third-grade strategy. We promote aggressively the importance of reading outside of school—30 minutes, every child, every day. With leadership from the Roc the Future initiative, student literacy is a community-wide effort. They help us to coordinate school-based literacy with city libraries and recreation centers, the Rochester Education Foundation, local businesses and the RocRead partners who promote student reading and engage thousands of students over school breaks. Together, we are taking a community approach to instill a love of reading in every Rochester child.

Parent engagement: Parents are their children's first and most important teachers, and we need their full support as partners in education. For District staff, this means we must treat parents as respected partners. Parents must do their

part by getting their children to school, enforcing rules of conduct, reading together, ensuring that homework gets done, and encouraging children to give their best effort. We are taking steps wherever we can to increase the respect shown to parents. This includes relatively simple steps, like setting aside parking spots designated for parents outside schools and Central Office. We also have assigned at least one parent liaison to every school building. We will review their roles and responsibilities with the goal of achieving continuous, measurable improvement in parent support and participation.

Management Systems

If good intentions were the key to academic achievement, Rochester would be performing among the best districts in the state. Our schools and Central Office are filled with talented, well-educated professionals. We've had no shortage of ideas to help students improve. What we've lacked is the strong management system and discipline to execute on ideas and hold people accountable for achieving results.

Rigorous evaluations of all staff: The Annual Professional Performance Review process required by New York is a step toward greater accountability. We are committed to helping Principals and other instructional leaders to improve their ability to assess classroom practice fairly and accurately, and to coach teachers on needed improvements. Effective evaluation and meaningful coaching of new teachers is particularly critical.

In addition, we are working to implement more rigorous evaluations of all employees, based on relevant student performance metrics. The Superintendent reviews evaluation results for all departments to ensure that they reflect high standards. In addition, new teachers and administrators can no longer expect to automatically receive tenure. Tenure must be earned through demonstrated contributions to student achievement and growth, plus advancement of other District priorities.

Before APPR, we had an evaluation system where virtually all adults were told they are doing a good job while students had the lowest performance in New York State. We intend to use the evaluations as a ladder to drive continuous improvement—the goal of every profession—and not as a hammer to threaten poor performers.

High ethical standards: As educators, we are entrusted with the community's most valuable resources—our children. That requires us to maintain the highest ethical standards as we do our jobs each day. Through internal education and enforcement, we will ensure that staff members at all levels observe the New York State educator's code of ethical conduct.

New school managers: While we work to become a more accountable and disciplined organization, some of our schools could benefit from the leadership of external managers. Colleges and other organizations offer proven management expertise that could quickly enhance an individual school, building confidence among families. That school would be an incubator for fresh management ideas that could be applied to other schools. We will explore the feasibility of turning some of our schools over not only to colleges or universities, but also to groups of parents and teachers or other qualified and committed organizations. Bold, experimental ideas must be considered given the low performance we are achieving now.

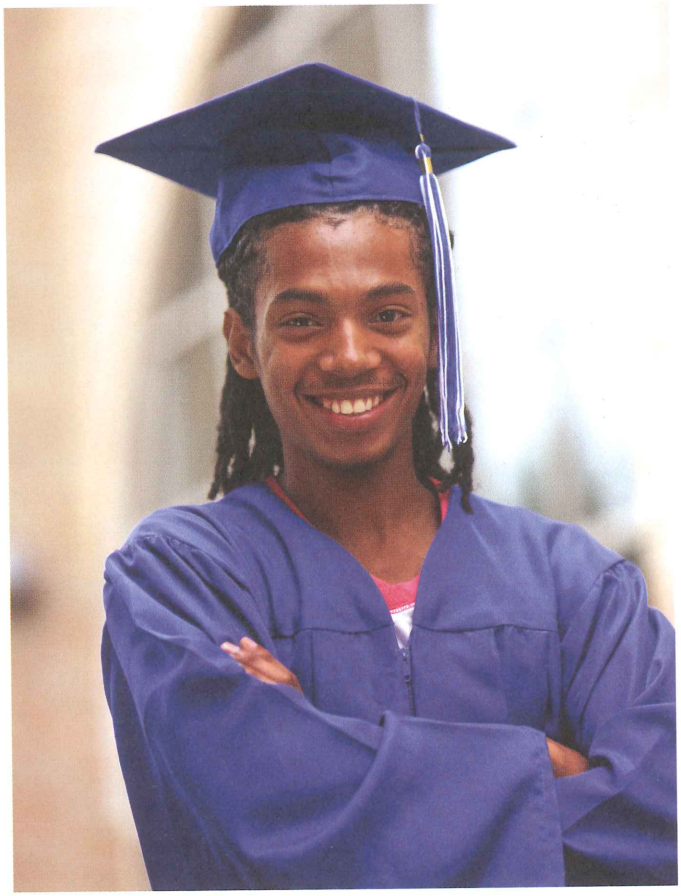
Ensuring students have access to textbooks: For too many years, our district has not been able to provide all students all the textbooks they need. The issue isn't money, it's management. We are implementing a new system to fix this problem, ensuring that teachers have the texts and materials they need before the school year begins. Students can take textbooks home, and we will provide low-cost classics they can make notes in and keep for independent reading or class assignments. We will also provide teachers of Common Core subject areas with classroom libraries of materials to support instruction.

Spotlight ◀ Externally Managed Schools

Goal: Recruit qualified, external organizations to manage some schools.

Timetable: Turn over management of one school in fall 2015

Status: Several organizations are considering or developing proposals by May 2014



Yes, We Can!

Every action described in this document requires careful planning, disciplined execution, and accountability for achieving results. The challenges are complex; the need to improve is urgent. This is the time to focus and finish.

In short, the road to success will not be easy. But we will get there. We have a compass to guide our work as simple as the Golden Rule. Every day, in every interaction and decision, the adults of the Rochester City School District must treat our students as we would want our own children to be treated. If we do that, success is inevitable.

Our staff is highly trained and talented. Our students have the desire and potential to succeed. We have the support of a generous community. Working together, we can make Rochester the best city in urban America to teach, work in or attend a school.

How We Will Assess Progress

The 2008-2013 strategic plan identified more than 40 measures for tracking progress. Many of these were never actually tracked, because the baseline data was not collected and targets were never set.

We believe that a few key measures can provide the leading indicators of our improvement as an organization. Through the performance review process, we can rigorously assess the contribution of individual employees to achieving District priorities and help them to continuously improve.

TARGETS	BASELINE (2012-13)	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Attendance[1]	91%	91%	92%	93%	94%	95%
3rd Grade Reading[2]	5%	10%	15%	25%	50%	60%
Graduation[3]	48%	50%	60%	65%	70%	70%
College Readiness[4]	5%	7%	10%	20%	25%	30%
Grade 3-8 ELA	5%	10%	15%	25%	50%	60%
Grade 3-8 Math	5%	10%	15%	25%	50%	60%
Growth Scores[5]	4.6	6	8	9	11	13

1 Average daily attendance District-wide. We also will track the percentage of chronically absent students
2 ELA test data for grade 3, AIMS web assessment for K-2
3 Graduation cohorts include all active and inactive students
4 Students who score 75% on Regents ELA and 80% on Regents math exams or better
5 Mean Growth Scores for District teachers calculated by NYSED and converted to "HEDI" scores for APPR. A "9" is the state average for student growth.

How to Support Us	What Parents Can Do	What the Community Can Do
Attendance	Require children to attend school every day	Attend truancy outreach events Help families address barriers that interfere with attendance Monitor attendance Ask students why they aren't in school, don't serve them in your business during school hours
Reading	Read to or with your children • Every child • At least 30 minutes outside of school • Every single day	Ask children what they are reading Tell them about your favorite books and stories Purchase books to donate to schools and families
Proper behavior	Insist that children treat teachers, staff members, and classmates with respect Teach them that violence is never acceptable	Engage in a community review of the district code of conduct Mentor students
Effort	Provide a quiet place and consistent time for study Ensure they get enough sleep Make homework a requirement • Expect about 10 minutes per day, per grade level	Talk to students about how they are doing in school Engage in friendly competitions for higher grades, attendance Tutor students

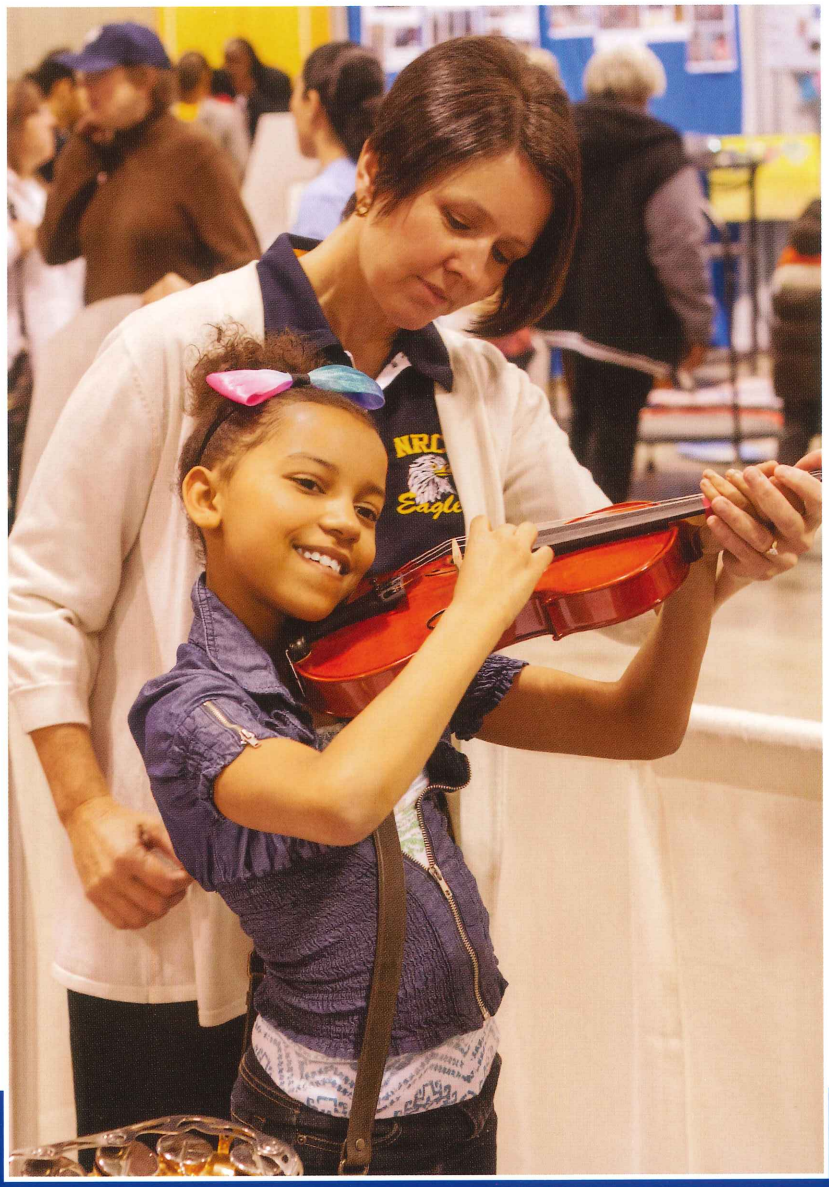
We Will Treat Every Child Like One of Our Own

An Action Plan for the Rochester City School District

2014-2018

March 2014

We Are the Rochester



Our Mission

To provide a quality education that ensures our students graduate with the skills to be successful in the global economy.

Our Challenge

We know that every child has the desire and potential to succeed. We cannot provide all of our students a stable home or supportive neighborhood. But we can provide schools where they are surrounded by caring adults who give them the time, love, and support they need. We will treat every child like one of our own.

We Will Treat Every Child Like One of Our Own

ROCHESTER CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

An Action Plan for the Rochester City School District

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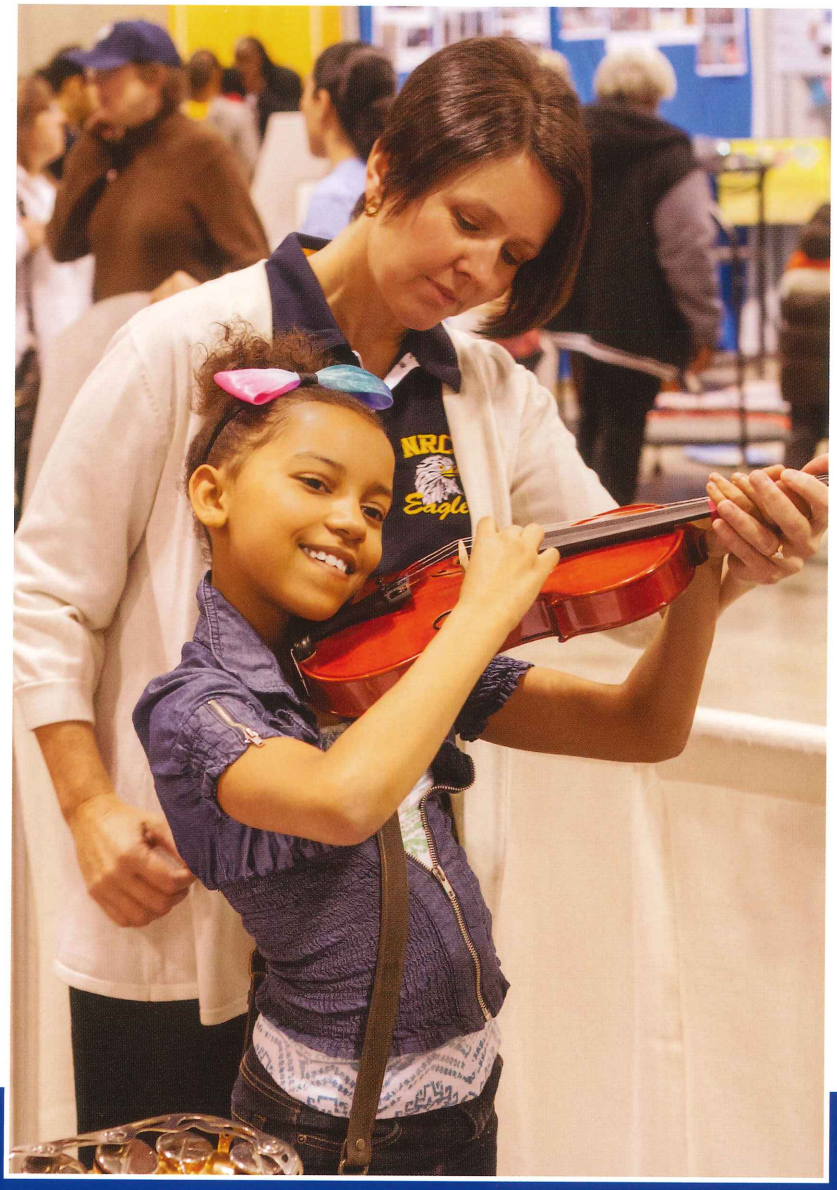

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City School District

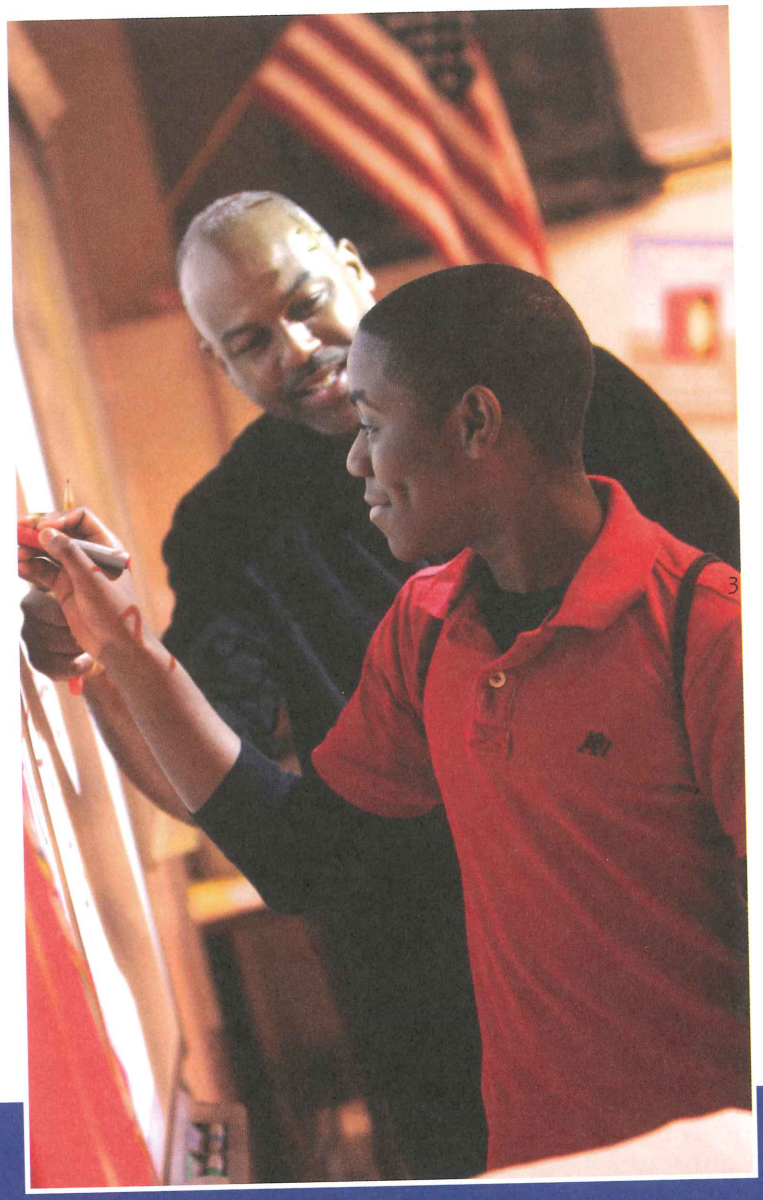
Our Vision

Every child is a work of art.

Create a masterpiece.

Our Priorities

- Student Achievement and Growth
- Effective and Efficient Allocation of Resources
- Communication and Customer Service
- Parent, Family, and Community Involvement
- Management Systems



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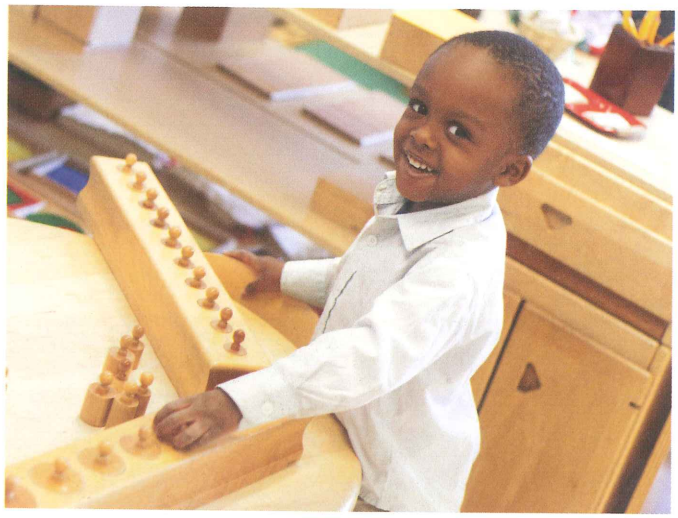


Introduction

Rochester's students and families urgently need better educational outcomes. Our district ranks at or near the bottom statewide in student achievement, with some of the lowest test scores and graduation rates. Yet we have excellent staff members, many students who persevere and succeed, and some excellent schools. Our challenge is to make success more widespread and immediate. All of our schools must provide a certain path out of poverty for our children and serve as an asset to our city's vitality.

Over the past 25 years, under seven different Superintendents, billions of dollars have been spent on different approaches to improving student achievement and school performance. We have tried creating middle schools, then eliminating them, shifting grade configurations, opening schools with specific themes, creating small schools-within-schools, phasing out low-performing schools and creating new schools in their place. We have used six different curricular programs to support English Language Arts instruction in the past 12 years.

These past reforms have caused instability and upheaval for students, families and staff. Unfortunately, none of them has improved outcomes. Rochester students fail to perform as well as students in New York's other "Big 5" districts with similar demographics. Of our 54 schools, 35 are designated as Priority or Focus schools in 2013-14—the lowest 5 or 10 percent statewide in student achievement. As a result, city families seek alternatives to District schools for their children. Some relocate to the suburbs. Others choose charter schools. Since 2006-07, the number of students enrolling in charter schools has more than quadrupled to more than 3,200, or 11% of our total enrollment. Three new charter schools will open in 2014-15, increasing the enrollment loss to 4,110 students. Our community is running out of patience, and we are running out of time before the state will enforce its own solutions.

Poverty presents terrible challenges, but it cannot be an excuse. Rochester students are as smart and talented as students anywhere in the world, with just as much potential. We must use the District's resources to mitigate poverty, giving our students the time and support they need to succeed.

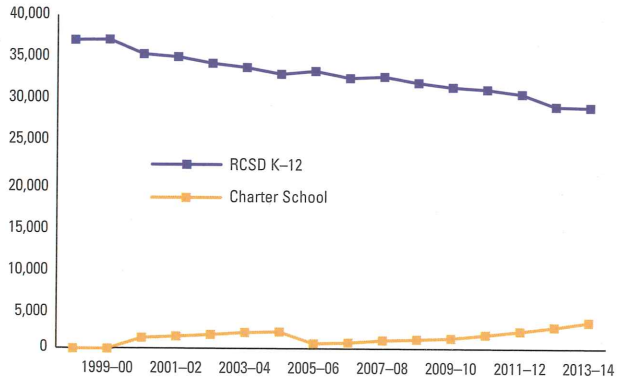
The answer is not to develop a new strategic plan at this time, replacing the 2008-2013 document through a process that would delay progress and create instability. Rather, it is imperative to focus and finish execution of the key strategies we have identified. We have laid out worthwhile strategies to improve our schools. They focus on the fundamentals, such as getting children to read on grade level by 3rd grade, making sure they attend school every day, and closing the opportunity gap. These fundamental strategies are supported by our key District priorities:

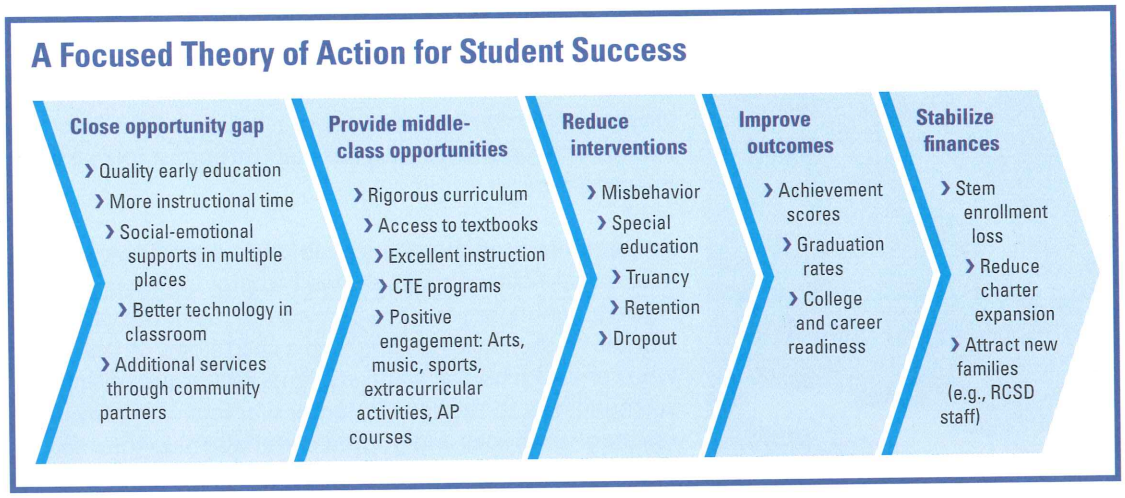
- Student Achievement and Growth
- Effective, Efficient Allocation of Resources
- Communication and Customer Service
- Parent, Family, and Community Involvement
- Management Systems

Our Superintendent is accountable to the Board of Education for achieving measurable progress in each of these priority areas. They provide a manageable list to guide the work of our organization, derived from the strategic plan's 14 objectives, 40 sub-strategies and 199 tactical recommendations. This Action Plan, developed through three years of consultation with the community, parents, the Board of Education, teachers and administrative leaders, outlines the focused actions that will allow our District to advance these priorities and provide the quality schools our community needs.

While recognizing an urgent need to improve, **we must work to maintain stability for students, families, and staff** to the great-

Over the past 15 years, RCSD K–12 enrollment has decreased by 8,002 students (-22%)





Our theory of action is grounded in the belief that all children can succeed if we give students and staff the time, opportunities and support they need.

est extent possible. That is why we have stopped phasing out low-performing schools and slowed the conversion to K-8 schools. Equity requires us to focus on providing students in all schools a better experience—creating a District of continuous improvement, rather than a few islands of opportunity.

The time to act is now. We must stop believing that poverty makes our mission impossible, or waiting for increased government funding to get the job done. Using the resources we have, **we must transform our District culture to one of setting and achieving high expectations.** Adults in the Rochester City School District must treat our students as they would want their own children to be treated.

Our Theory of Action

Poverty is a fact for most of the families we serve. A December 2013 report from the Rochester Area Community Foundation found that Rochester has the fifth highest poverty level in the nation. We rank third among the top 100 cities for the concentration of extremely poor neighborhoods. As a result, too many of our children come to school hungry, troubled and unprepared.

Poverty presents terrible challenges, but it cannot be an excuse. Rochester students are as smart and talented as students anywhere in the world, with just as much potential. We must use the District's resources to mitigate poverty, giving our students the time and support they need to succeed.

We cannot give every student a stable, nurturing home or a safe, supportive neighborhood. However, we can provide schools that use every available tool to engage students in positive activities and supportive relationships with caring adults. We must create a climate where students treat their peers and the adults at school with respect. This will allow far greater numbers of children to learn at high levels. More students will graduate ready to be productive citizens, with the skills to succeed in college and careers.

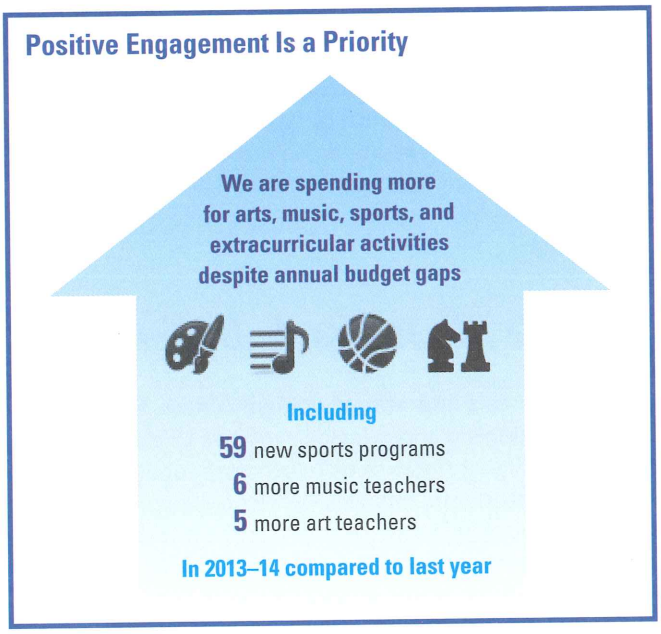
We can close the opportunity gap that puts low-income students at such a disadvantage, through key initiatives including:

- Quality early education
- Increased instructional time
- Effective social-emotional supports in multiple places in schools and the community

Then, we provide our students the same educational opportunities available to many middle-class families:

- Rigorous curriculum
- Access to quality textbooks, literature, manipulatives and other supplies
- Excellent instruction
- Positive engagement opportunities, including arts, music, sports and other extracurricular activities.

Economically, providing middle-class engagement opportunities is a matter of social justice. Strategically, it is part of our **prevention strategy**. Art, music, and sports provide essential physical and emotional outlets for children.



Our successful students often tell us that participating in the activities they love—whether it's a football team, school play, science club, or choral group—gives them the motivation to attend school and work hard in their classes. Providing these activities helps us to meet the social and emotional needs of every student.

As part of our strategy, each school will have a student support team to identify and serve children who need additional social or emotional support. **In the 2014-15 budget, we will invest an additional $1.3 million to ensure that every school has at least one full-time social worker, along with the many other in-school supports already in place.** A small percentage of students need more intensive services than schools alone can provide. Our support teams will provide case management to connect these students to the outside services they need and track their progress.

What is the payback on positive engagement?

In 2013-14, our District will spend $7.7 million on safety and security in schools, $11 million on grade retention, and $24.2 million on school programs for students who need an alternative to traditional high school. Security costs have more than doubled since 2004-05, and alternative program costs are three times higher—while music, art and sports were being cut over the same period. The prevention strategy is an investment in reversing these trends, allowing our District to shift resources from retention and intervention services to classroom education and positive outlets for our children.

How We Must Work Differently

Success requires a new way of doing business, from school receptionists and principals' offices to classrooms to Central Office. It requires us to be more focused on our customers—students, families, District colleagues and the broader community—and more proactive rather than reactive about meeting their needs. We are working daily to change the culture of our district to one that is responsive, accountable and disciplined.

Responsive: We expect staff members to respond to requests or concerns from our customers within 48 hours. Wegmans' world-renowned approach to excellent customer service is being shared with our staff through a formal training program.

Accountable: Staff members at all levels must be accountable for performing their jobs well and for improving student achievement. Everyone can play a role—from the cafeteria worker whose smile can brighten a child's day, to the painter who can make teachers and students feel proud of their surroundings, to the service center workers who provide teachers textbooks and printed materials to do their crucial work. Accountability means rigorous evaluations not only for teachers and principals, but for every employee. It also requires us to shift resources to fund our priorities through the budget process.

Disciplined: Rather than flip-flopping names and themes and grade configurations, we must maintain focus on improving the schools we have. Between 2008 and 2011, the District started the phase-out of eight high schools and one elementary school; started the phase-in of five new high schools and one elementary school; and redesigned six schools by grade level or program. Instead of constantly changing school structures, we must maintain stability and continuity as much as possible. With relentless focus on our priorities, we can improve educational outcomes for children throughout our City.

District Priorities and Strategies

Student Achievement

In 2012-13, just 5% of our 3rd-through-8th graders demonstrated proficiency in the Common Core-based assessment in English Language Arts and Math. Our four-year graduation rate stands at 49%. Performance is especially low among African American students, Hispanic students, males, and English Language Learners. For the 2008 cohort, the graduation rate for students with disabilities was a shockingly low 19%. We face no more urgent task than to improve programs and services so that more students learn at higher levels.

How do we do it? First, by focusing our efforts. In the summer and fall of 2013, we convened dozens of the District's top instructional leaders in a facilitated process to determine which academic priorities provide the greatest promise for driving significant, lasting improvement in our top District priority—student achievement and growth. We then created cross-functional teams to support each priority—more and better learning time, reading by 3rd grade, and instructional excellence. These teams are led by district and school personnel with support from community partners. **These teams are accountable for setting and achieving improvement targets. Through the budget process, we are purposefully shifting resources to support them.**

Spotlight **Summer Learning Loss**

Goal: Prevent our youngest students from losing critical skills and knowledge over the summer by offering enriched, literacy-focused programs.

Timetable: Extend program to all pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade students by summer 2014.

Status: Program and funding requirements will be included in 2014-15 budget

Our Top Three Academic Priorities to Drive Improved Achievement

1. **More and Better Learning Time:** The traditional school calendar (180 days of instruction, 6.3 hours per day) holds time constant and leaves the amount of learning as a variable. In high-poverty districts like Rochester, students need more time and support than students in higher-income districts, where most families are able to provide higher levels of support at home. Yet before the 2013-14 school year, Rochester students received the least instructional time of any group of students in Monroe County and were among the lowest in the nation.

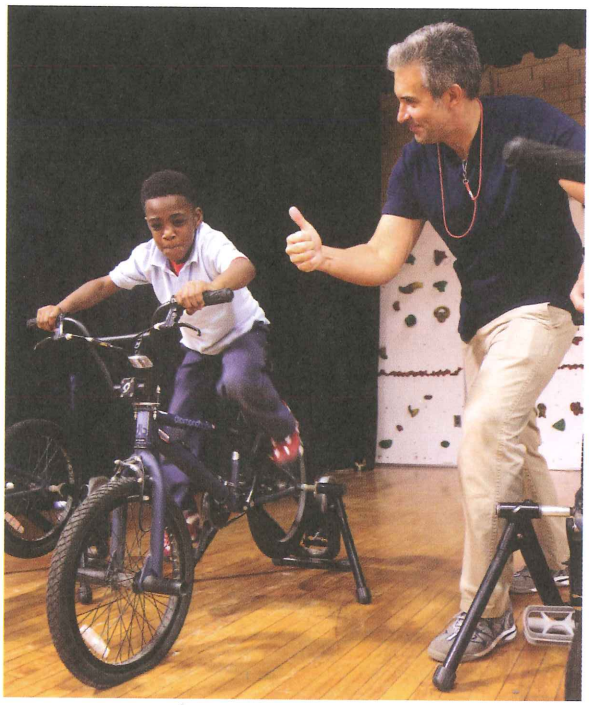
   To improve achievement, we are varying time in school to make student learning and growth a constant. We are increasing instructional time in multiple ways.

   - This year, the District eliminated the 50-year practice of early dismissal on Wednesdays, which adds more than 29 hours of instructional time—nearly a full week of school—for all students over the course of a year.
   - Buses are now required to arrive at least 15 minutes before bell time, so that students can be ready for instruction when the day begins.
   - We've also added 200 hours of optional instruction time at 13 extended learning schools. Funded primarily by School Improvement Grants, these schools provide extra academic support to students who sign up, along with extracurricular activities.
   - We've added 300 hours of instructional time at five expanded learning schools (Schools 9, 10, 23, 45, 46). These communities engaged in a collaborative, year-long process to rethink their schedules around a longer school day. They provide more development and planning time for teachers, with more academic support and enrichment activities for students, delivered in partnership with community-based organizations.

   Taken together, these changes are increasing learning time by 18% to 30%. In the 2014-15 school year, we intend to provide expanded schedules at up to seven more schools. We are seeing evidence that expanded learning time boosts achievement. Early results indicate higher student growth, improved attendance, better student/teacher relationships, and fewer behavior problems at our expanded learning schools. In the 2012-13 school year, our first school with an expanded schedule—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. School No. 9—achieved academic growth among the highest in the district, despite serving a student population that is among the most challenged.

   We are also working aggressively to reduce summer learning loss. This problem is well-documented in studies and especially harmful to low-income students, who lose about a month's worth of math skills and two months in reading every July and August. **We served more than 10,000 students last summer, and we intend to make Rochester a leader at reducing summer learning loss through multiple efforts.**

   - We are increasing summer enrichment activities to accelerate achievement. That means offering city children the same kinds of fun, safe, and educational group activities that middle-class families take for granted in the summer. One example is the Horizons Summer Enrichment Program, which has provided best-practice support to students for more than 20 years, with help from businesses and the broader community. Another is the Summer Scholars program funded by the Wallace Foundation, which will provide enriched learning for about 700 rising fourth-graders this summer as part of a national study on ways to curb learning loss. More than 2,000 District students received summer enrichment through programs like these in 2013, and we intend to grow this number in future years.
   - In July and August of 2014, we will offer additional summer reading opportunities to every student who will be entering kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, or 3rd grade next year. This is an investment in achieving the goal of helping students read on grade level by 3rd grade.



- Expanded partnerships with City government to increase summer reading. In 2013, 11 high-achieving juniors and seniors had summer jobs as literacy aides, working in city libraries to help younger children enjoy books and sharpen their literacy skills. We plan to expand that program and collaborate with the City in other ways to promote reading during summer break.

2. **Reading by 3rd Grade:** A critical factor in successful completion of high school is being able to read proficiently by 3rd grade. Why? Repeated research has shown that students must learn to read well by grade 3 in order to shift from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. **Students who cannot read on grade level by 3rd grade are four times less likely to graduate; if they are poor, that rises to 13 times less likely.**

   We are pursuing a four-part strategy to increase the numbers of 3rd graders who can read well:

   - Enroll all four-year-olds in quality pre-kindergarten, with full-day programs for as many students as possible. In February 2014, more than 820 students shifted from a half-day to a full-day program thanks to a $5.9 million state expansion grant. More than 70% of pre-kindergarten students now attend for a full day, and our intent is to grow that percentage.
   - Provide summer programs to reverse the historic pattern of learning loss for all students in pre-k through 3rd grades. We will continue to strengthen our relationship with Horizons and other community partnerships for expanded summer learning opportunities.
   - Work with teachers to improve delivery of the Common Core literacy curriculum. Smart Notebooks are supporting K-2 ELA teachers with interactive lessons in English and Spanish.

> We will get children ready for college and careers when we achieve our goal of teaching them to read on grade level by third grade.

   - Increase the capacity of educators to use assessment data to target instruction to the skills students are struggling to master.

3. **Instructional Excellence:** Classroom instruction is the heart of what we do, and the poor achievement of our students requires us to do better. The Common Core instructional program provides an opportunity. Teachers, administrators and families must collaborate to help students learn new material and achieve higher expectations. We have invested significantly in professional learning to begin the process, sending hundreds of staff members to intensive workshops in Albany and providing more than 16,000 hours of professional learning devoted to Common Core instruction before fully implementing the curriculum in 2013-14. We also invested in more than 100 instructional and technology coaches this year to support roll-out of the curriculum.

   Our cross-functional team is focused on sharing best practices in the classroom and using data to target instruction. We are identifying demonstration classrooms. We are also training Principals in how to recognize excellent instruction and guide teacher development towards that goal. In addition, linked to the Reading by 3rd Grade team, we are working to help teachers across the district use formative assessment data to guide their instruction. We are beginning to see signs that focusing on Common Core instruction will improve student learning. **In the January 2014 Regents examinations, more students took the Comprehensive English and Integrated Algebra exams than the previous year, and pass rates were higher.**

Additional Strategies to Improve Student Achievement

Arts, music, sports and extracurricular activities: In the past, these offerings were viewed as "extras" that were often first on the chopping block when budgets were cut. We have shifted our thinking to one that recognizes them as essential investments in closing the opportunity gap. These activities help keep students positively engaged in school and with their peers. They also contribute to parent engagement, providing positive reasons for parents to visit and participate in their child's school. We've added opportunities in all these areas, including the creation of 59 new sports programs.

Consistent time for core instruction: No matter where a student attends school in our district, he or she should

Spotlight Career and Technical Education

Goal: Successfully prepare high school students for technical careers by restoring the quality and prominence of CTE programs, particularly at the Edison campus.

Timetable: Begin making improvements in fall 2014.

Status: We are moving immediately to implement industry assessments and accelerate state approval of CTE programs. Leadership and governance changes are under consideration.

count on receiving the same quality and time for instruction in core academic subjects, along with CTE, art, music and physical education. To make that a reality, we instituted a new master schedule District-wide in the 2013-14 school year. The implementation wasn't perfect, but we needed a new approach to address inconsistencies and shortfalls in previous scheduling at the school level.

- Many elementary schools offered little or no instruction in science and social studies.
- Some elementary schools offered music instruction but no art; others offered art with no music.
- Hundreds of high-school courses were not aligned with the rigor of the state Regents curriculum.

The new schedule ensures consistent instructional time in all subjects at every elementary school. **In the next school year, we will build on this foundation by ensuring every school has at least one full-time music teacher, and by maintaining all extra-curricular music programs.** At the high school level, we will ensure that all classes meet Regents requirements and work to increase the availability of Advanced Placement courses. Our five expanded-day schools manage their schedules internally, meeting or exceeding the time requirements of the master schedule. Our goal is to return more scheduling flexibility and control to the school level District-wide over time.

Career and technical education: Over the next five years, employers in our region will need to fill about 15,000 jobs in career paths that don't require a four-year college degree. Opportunities for these jobs are being promoted by the Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council, representing major local employers in Rochester. Rochester was once a leader in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs to help students obtain jobs like these, particularly at the renowned Edison Tech High School.

Unfortunately, we now offer city school students fewer career education opportunities than suburban students receive through BOCES. Only 7 of our 18 CTE programs are approved by the New York State Education Department. Graduates of approved programs get a technical endorsement on their diplomas that can help them to land a job. Rochester students who graduate from one of our CTE-focused high schools, on the Edison campus, typically receive 200 hours less career instruction than their counterparts in BOCES programs. None of our students last year took the technical assessments that should be routine at the completion of a CTE program. In fact, it appears that many students who take part in CTE programs may not even be properly recorded as doing so.

A thorough evaluation of District CTE offerings by the Career and Technical Education Technical Assistance Center of New York State is complete. We are moving immediately on some recommendations and exploring longer-term solutions to provide CTE programs that are once again as good or better as any in the community.

Special education: Similarly, we plan to overhaul our approach to educating children with disabilities. Just 19% of students with disabilities in the 2008 cohort graduated from high school with their class (by August of 2012), compared to 47% statewide. Only 3% graduated with a Regents diploma. Another 38% of the class dropped out, and the same proportion was still in school. These results reflect an outdated approach to providing special education services that is not meeting the needs of our students and families. We are moving aggressively to implement the practices that are achieving far better results in other "Big 5" districts and suburban schools. This requires us to change the way students are evaluated and classified, along with the way we deliver services.

Effective, Efficient Allocation of Resources

We must use resources wisely to fund our priorities in a time of declining revenues. We also need a budget *process* that provides stability—ending the tradition of yo-yo budgeting, laying off and rehiring staff every summer, which has created uncertainty for students, families, staff members and the entire community every year. We have made progress finding efficiencies throughout the organization—identifying $51.8 million in operational efficiencies over the past three years. An example is our shift to school-based tutoring, which is serving twice as many students with more learning time at lower cost. The Spending Money Smartly project, funded through the Gates Foundation and a New York State Efficiency Grant, is greatly improving our ability to produce sophisticated, long-term budget forecasts and target resources to priorities.

Effective, Efficient Management Team: This ongoing, cross-functional team will work to prioritize expenditures that benefit students and reduce or eliminate those that don't.

Two areas where we have found efficiencies away from the classroom are health care and facilities. By becoming self-insured for health care in 2011, we have saved more than $7 million every year. We also must match our physical space to declining enrollment. As part of the Facilities Modernization Plan, we have closed some school buildings that are no longer needed and reduced the use of leased space. Over time, we will generate significant savings by aligning the space we use with our needs.

Neighborhood School pilot program: In 2013-14, we will spend $52.4 million on transportation, 7% of our entire budget. Our school choice policy is a factor. Many parents choose schools further away from home in order to get bus service.

Having children attend high-quality neighborhood schools will help us to reduce transportation costs while improving instructional systems. **Neighborhood schools serve as lighthouses—they help families connect with each other in the neighborhood, raise property values and instill community pride.**

If most children attend schools close to where they live, we can afford to bus more students to school without increasing transportation costs. To demonstrate this, we are planning a pilot program in 2014-15 that will bus most or all students from one neighborhood to their neighborhood school. In the following year, we hope to expand the pilot with the passage of state legislation that supports transportation to neighborhood schools.

Communication and Customer Service

We must instill throughout our district the notion that students and families are our customers. Our District exists to serve them. We must engage them and the broader community meaningfully and respectfully in the important work we do together.

School orientation: The start of a school year is a critical time to establish expectations and begin to build or reinforce relationships. Back-to-school orientation events are standard in most districts but they were a rarity in Rochester until we began requiring them in 2012. We must continually improve these events and look for other ways to engage families with school.

Listening and responding to stakeholders: We have set expectations in several ways for effective, two-way communication. They include a 48-hour response to questions and concerns from parents, and twice-a-month Coffee & Conversation meetings where parents and community members can bring issues directly to the Superintendent. Beginning in 2013, we used new methods to gather input on the proposed budget, including a dedicated phone line and email account. We now hold Budget Open House events where top leaders explain District finances and listen to feedback that, in turn, will influence budget decisions. In the future, we will experiment with more ideas using technology to make participation easier.

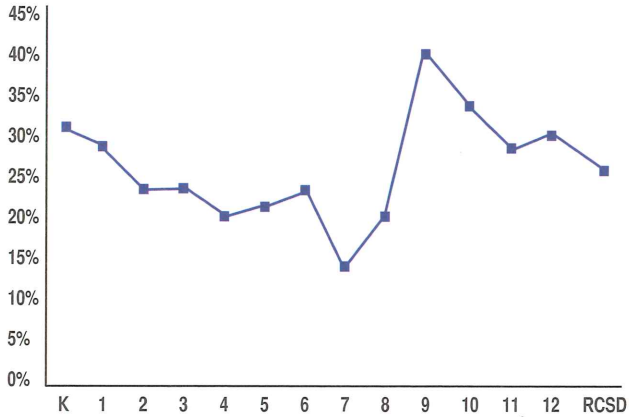
Customer service: We are learning from the best: Wegmans has trained our top leaders in their approach to working with customers, and they are passing it on to employees throughout the district. School secretaries are just one of the key groups that are learning to "be the very best at serving the needs of our customers," as Wegmans puts it. We are indebted to the Wegmans organization for sharing their expertise and human resources to support our efforts.

Parent, Family and Community Involvement

Students cannot excel without the support and active engagement of families and the broader community. All adults can help to educate our children in a variety of ways.

Student attendance: On any given day, about 3,000 city students are absent from school. More than 7,000 students are chronically absent—missing 18 or more days, or 10% of the school year or higher. Research shows a direct

More than 7,500 District students are chronically absent. Students who miss 18 or more days (10% of the school year) are far more likely to struggle and drop out.



link between attendance and achievement. Students with good or excellent attendance are likely to achieve well and graduate. Chronically absent students are far more likely to struggle academically, engage in misbehavior and drop out.

Attendance habits are formed at an early age, which is why we are targeting our improvement efforts on elementary schools. When a kindergartner or 2nd grader regularly misses school, it's not the student's problem—it's a community issue that requires us to better engage parents. We have led a community response to this critical issue, bringing the City of Rochester, the United Way, Monroe County and many other community resources together with an outside consultant. Most significantly, we are appealing to families and other adults in the lives of our students to help us in this effort. We are implementing best practices for getting more children to school.

We are training staff in how to carefully monitor attendance, intervene quickly and follow through, linking students and families to needed community services. Community volunteers, including employees at Central Office, make home visits to students not attending school. When we began in 2012-13 with 4 schools, average daily attendance increased from 88% to 90%, even as we improved record-keeping of attendance so that students were no longer automatically recorded as "present." We are now focusing on 8 schools and will focus on improved attendance as an essential goal.

Student conduct: It's a sad fact that most young people in Rochester have been affected by violence. Too often we read headlines about students or former students who have been seriously hurt or killed by violent crimes.

Tragedies like these have multiple victims—the families and friends who lose a loved one, the community that feels less safe, and the perpetrators. They have lost the hope that education should provide, succumbing to life on the streets. **We need a community-wide initiative to combat youth violence and other forms of misbehavior.** That is why we are convening a task force setting community-wide standards for how we expect young people to behave.

Similar to efforts in Denver, Buffalo and Baltimore, this group—coordinated by an experienced facilitator—will recommend improvements to our disciplinary approach and help set a new code of conduct for young people. This process will be led by the Board of Education and we will engage all stakeholders—including students, parents, social service organizations, law enforcement, the faith community, teachers and administrators.

Student violence and disrespectful behavior does not occur in schools alone and cannot be solved by schools independently. Our entire community, starting with students and parents, must agree on what constitutes proper behavior. Then we must work together to ensure those standards of behavior are met.

Spotlight Community Task Force on Student Behavior

Goal: Develop a community-wide approach to combating violence, disrespect and misbehavior by youth.

Timetable: Task force will work for a year to develop solutions by spring 2015

Status: Task force members will be appointed in March.

Supporting literacy: Parents and the community are essential parts of our reading-by-third-grade strategy. We promote aggressively the importance of reading outside of school—30 minutes, every child, every day. With leadership from the Roc the Future initiative, student literacy is a community-wide effort. They help us to coordinate school-based literacy with city libraries and recreation centers, the Rochester Education Foundation, local businesses and the RocRead partners who promote student reading and engage thousands of students over school breaks. Together, we are taking a community approach to instill a love of reading in every Rochester child.

Parent engagement: Parents are their children's first and most important teachers, and we need their full support as partners in education. For District staff, this means we must treat parents as respected partners. Parents must do their

part by getting their children to school, enforcing rules of conduct, reading together, ensuring that homework gets done, and encouraging children to give their best effort. We are taking steps wherever we can to increase the respect shown to parents. This includes relatively simple steps, like setting aside parking spots designated for parents outside schools and Central Office. We also have assigned at least one parent liaison to every school building. We will review their roles and responsibilities with the goal of achieving continuous, measurable improvement in parent support and participation.

Management Systems

If good intentions were the key to academic achievement, Rochester would be performing among the best districts in the state. Our schools and Central Office are filled with talented, well-educated professionals. We've had no shortage of ideas to help students improve. What we've lacked is the strong management system and discipline to execute on ideas and hold people accountable for achieving results.

Rigorous evaluations of all staff: The Annual Professional Performance Review process required by New York is a step toward greater accountability. We are committed to helping Principals and other instructional leaders to improve their ability to assess classroom practice fairly and accurately, and to coach teachers on needed improvements. Effective evaluation and meaningful coaching of new teachers is particularly critical.

In addition, we are working to implement more rigorous evaluations of all employees, based on relevant student performance metrics. The Superintendent reviews evaluation results for all departments to ensure that they reflect high standards. In addition, new teachers and administrators can no longer expect to automatically receive tenure. Tenure must be earned through demonstrated contributions to student achievement and growth, plus advancement of other District priorities.

Before APPR, we had an evaluation system where virtually all adults were told they are doing a good job while students had the lowest performance in New York State. We intend to use the evaluations as a ladder to drive continuous improvement—the goal of every profession—and not as a hammer to threaten poor performers.

High ethical standards: As educators, we are entrusted with the community's most valuable resources—our children. That requires us to maintain the highest ethical standards as we do our jobs each day. Through internal education and enforcement, we will ensure that staff members at all levels observe the New York State educator's code of ethical conduct.

New school managers: While we work to become a more accountable and disciplined organization, some of our schools could benefit from the leadership of external managers. Colleges and other organizations offer proven management expertise that could quickly enhance an individual school, building confidence among families. That school would be an incubator for fresh management ideas that could be applied to other schools. We will explore the feasibility of turning some of our schools over not only to colleges or universities, but also to groups of parents and teachers or other qualified and committed organizations. Bold, experimental ideas must be considered given the low performance we are achieving now.

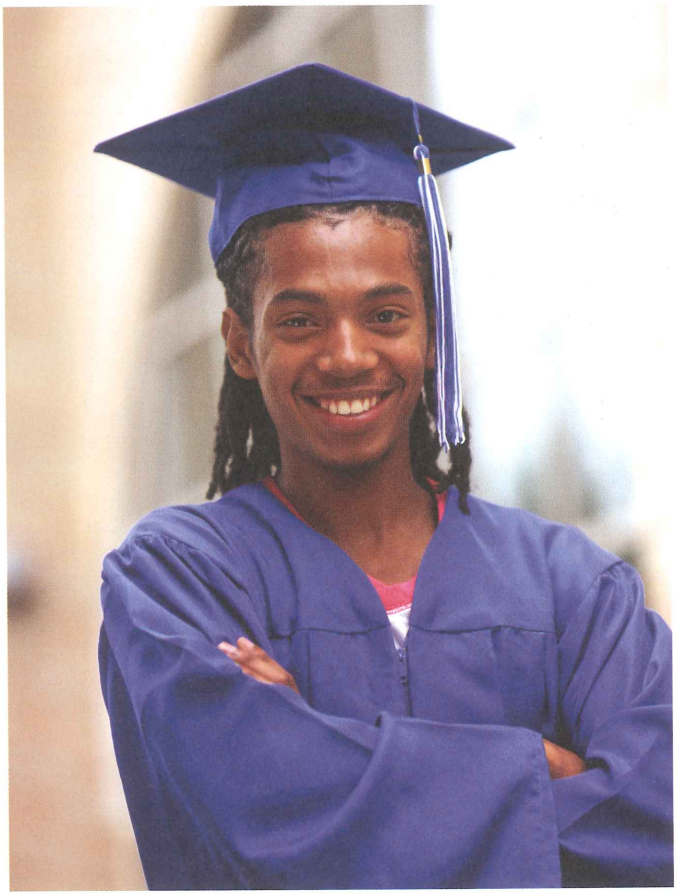
Ensuring students have access to textbooks: For too many years, our district has not been able to provide all students all the textbooks they need. The issue isn't money, it's management. We are implementing a new system to fix this problem, ensuring that teachers have the texts and materials they need before the school year begins. Students can take textbooks home, and we will provide low-cost classics they can make notes in and keep for independent reading or class assignments. We will also provide teachers of Common Core subject areas with classroom libraries of materials to support instruction.

Spotlight ◀ Externally Managed Schools

Goal: Recruit qualified, external organizations to manage some schools.

Timetable: Turn over management of one school in fall 2015

Status: Several organizations are considering or developing proposals by May 2014



Yes, We Can!

Every action described in this document requires careful planning, disciplined execution, and accountability for achieving results. The challenges are complex; the need to improve is urgent. This is the time to focus and finish.

In short, the road to success will not be easy. But we will get there. We have a compass to guide our work as simple as the Golden Rule. Every day, in every interaction and decision, the adults of the Rochester City School District must treat our students as we would want our own children to be treated. If we do that, success is inevitable.

Our staff is highly trained and talented. Our students have the desire and potential to succeed. We have the support of a generous community. Working together, we can make Rochester the best city in urban America to teach, work in or attend a school.

How We Will Assess Progress

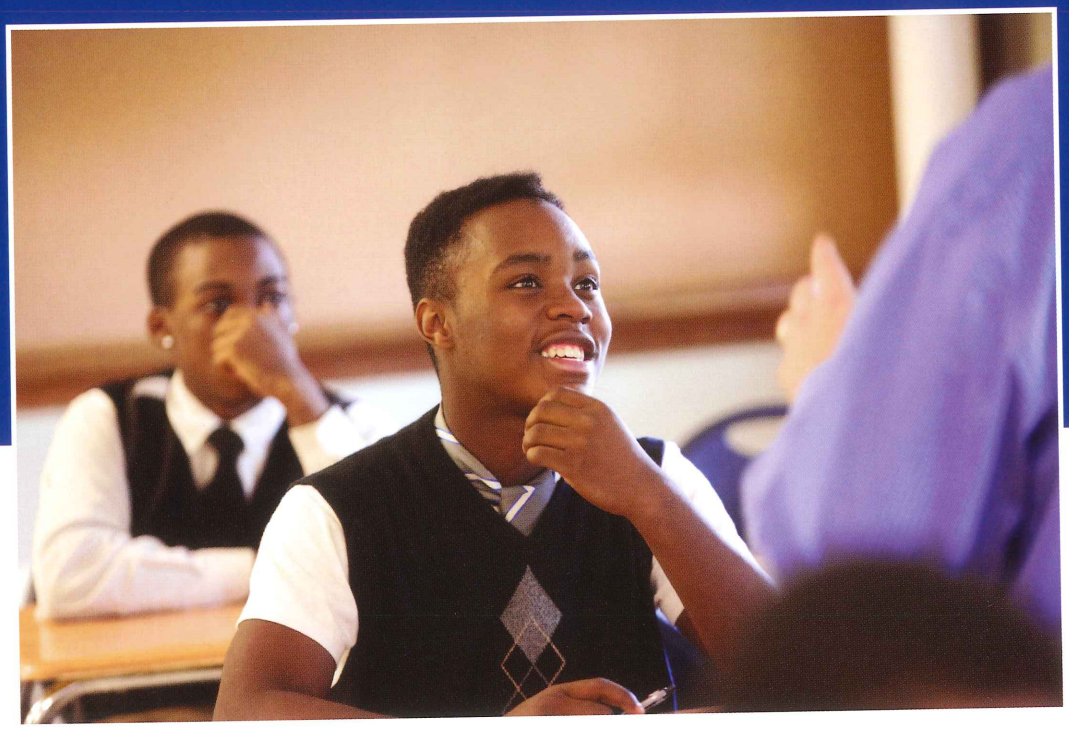
The 2008-2013 strategic plan identified more than 40 measures for tracking progress. Many of these were never actually tracked, because the baseline data was not collected and targets were never set.

We believe that a few key measures can provide the leading indicators of our improvement as an organization. Through the performance review process, we can rigorously assess the contribution of individual employees to achieving District priorities and help them to continuously improve.

TARGETS	BASELINE (2012-13)	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Attendance[1]	91%	91%	92%	93%	94%	95%
3rd Grade Reading[2]	5%	10%	15%	25%	50%	60%
Graduation[3]	48%	50%	60%	65%	70%	70%
College Readiness[4]	5%	7%	10%	20%	25%	30%
Grade 3-8 ELA	5%	10%	15%	25%	50%	60%
Grade 3-8 Math	5%	10%	15%	25%	50%	60%
Growth Scores[5]	4.6	6	8	9	11	13

1 Average daily attendance District-wide. We also will track the percentage of chronically absent students
2 ELA test data for grade 3, AIMS web assessment for K-2
3 Graduation cohorts include all active and inactive students
4 Students who score 75% on Regents ELA and 80% on Regents math exams or better
5 Mean Growth Scores for District teachers calculated by NYSED and converted to "HEDI" scores for APPR. A "9" is the state average for student growth.

How to Support Us	What Parents Can Do	What the Community Can Do
Attendance	Require children to attend school every day	Attend truancy outreach events Help families address barriers that interfere with attendance Monitor attendance Ask students why they aren't in school, don't serve them in your business during school hours
Reading	Read to or with your children • Every child • At least 30 minutes outside of school • Every single day	Ask children what they are reading Tell them about your favorite books and stories Purchase books to donate to schools and families
Proper behavior	Insist that children treat teachers, staff members, and classmates with respect Teach them that violence is never acceptable	Engage in a community review of the district code of conduct Mentor students
Effort	Provide a quiet place and consistent time for study Ensure they get enough sleep Make homework a requirement • Expect about 10 minutes per day, per grade level	Talk to students about how they are doing in school Engage in friendly competitions for higher grades, attendance Tutor students



Life's greatest gift
is the opportunity to throw oneself into a job that puts meaning and hope into the lives of other people.
Seizing this opportunity is the surest way to put meaning and hope into one's own life.

- Martin Haberman
Star Teachers of Children in Poverty

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