



Governor's Executive Budget

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Testimony Before: Assembly Ways and Means Committee
Assembly Education Committee
Senate Finance Committee
Senate Education Committee



Rochester City School District

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Introduction

My name is Everton Sewell, the Chief Financial Officer for the Rochester City School District. I am pleased to join you today on behalf of Interim Superintendent Daniel Lowengard who sends his regrets that he could not be here today. In his absence, I am honored to share some of the progress our team has made in the last year and our plans for the future. I want to thank all of you for the opportunity to be here, and for your support of public schools.

District Overview

The Rochester City School District has 65 schools and programs and serves nearly 30,000 students in grades Pre K-12. Within the District we have:

- 3,172 (11%) Pre-K Kindergarten students
- 4,075 (or 14%) English Language Learners (ELLs)
- 5,737 (or 21%) Students with Disabilities, of which 590 are attending specialized programs outside the District
- 6,500 full-time equivalencies

Additionally, we provide various services to:

- 5,832 student in 14 charter schools
- 975 students in 35 private schools
- 2,017 students in community-based Universal Pre-K organizations
- 806 enrolled in Urban-Suburban programs
- 1,840 individuals in adult education programs

In 2017, data from the U.S. Census Bureau showed that Rochester had a poverty rate of 56% which ranks 3rd in the nation. This is the highest amongst the Big 5 District's in New York State. Approximately 500 students have come to the District from hurricane-impacted areas, and all of our students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. In addition, the District has the lowest performance rate amongst the Big 5 in New York State.

- 11.4% proficient in ELA grades 3-8
- 10.7% proficient in Math grades 3-8

Strategic Framework

The mission of the Rochester City School District is to provide a quality education that ensures students graduate with the skills to be successful in a democratic society and the global economy. This includes providing an environment that is safe and nurturing to students. Everyone should be proud to send their children to the Rochester City School District. All departments within the District are working diligently to build on the successes that have contributed to student achievement within the last year. The District accomplishes achievements by adhering to its foundational pillars, and it will continue to disrupt long-

standing patterns of failure because students deserve a high-quality education that prepares them for careers and/or college. The District is focusing on the following priorities through multi-tiered systems of support that will:

1. Promote the well-being of the whole child, whole school, and whole community.

- Strong community schools, meaningful parent engagement, and literacy for a lifetime
- Positive school climate, culture and relationships with children and families
- Safe, supportive, trauma-responsive schools and classrooms
- Invitational and Family-Friendly Schools

2. Ensure Powerful Learning for Every Student

- High-quality, culturally, linguistically responsive and rigorous 21st century curriculum and instruction in all classrooms
- High-quality professional development and coaching support for Central Office, principals and teachers
- Responsive, data-informed, gap-closing systems of teaching and learning and social-emotional interventions
- Strong, research-based pre-school, parent engagement, and expanded learning opportunities that include after-school and summer learning programs

3. Build Capacity to Ensure Comprehensive School Improvement

- Aggressive recruitment and early hiring of high-quality and diverse District and school leaders, teachers, and employees
- Redesigned student-based allocation formula to ensure equity, transparency, and flexibility
- Responsive and highly effective central office organized to support school improvement

4. Cultivate Understanding, Collaboration, Partnerships and Advocacy for Equity and Justice For All

- Equity driven policies, goals, and measures
- Student voice and agency in authentic District and school work
- Data dashboards for transparent and accountable decision making
- Community and parent partnership outcomes for every department, program and school.

Highlights

While the District still has much to achieve, it is making good progress and is on the move. Here are a few examples:

1. Graduation Rates

The Rochester City School District has achieved its highest graduation rate in more than a decade. The New York State Education Department released its data for the 2018 graduating class on January 30, 2019, and it shows Rochester's four-year graduation rate was 53.5 % in June and 59.3% in August. These are both the highest percentages since at least 2005 when the State began keeping more rigorous accountability standards.

The District experienced an increase in August graduation rates from the previous year for all accountability sub-groups. This continues a trend of steady increase in graduation rates. Of note:

- 3.3% decrease in Dropouts, from 21.6% to 18.3%.
- 1.1% increase for Black students, from 58.6% to 59.7%.
- 1.9% increase for English Language Learners, from 24.8% to 26.7%.
- 3.4% increase for Hispanic students, from 51.6% to 55.0%.
- 5.3% increase for Students with Disabilities, from 36.4% to 41.7%.
- 6.7% increase for White students, from 60.6% to 67.3%.

2. ELA and Math Assessment Results

Rochester students continue to make steady progress in NYS English Language Arts (ELA) and math assessments, and the District remains focused on equity for all children. Every school with the Rochester City School District had gains in performance that show the highest level of proficiency the District has seen in at least five years.

3. Bilingual Student Population

Approximately 500 students came to Rochester after Hurricane Maria destroyed much of Puerto Rico in September 2017, and the Rochester City School District's Bilingual Language and Literacy Academy (BLLA) has told those students they have a home in Rochester. The District is proud to celebrate a program that is a first in the City of Rochester. The BLLA provides students with equitable access to learn to speak, understand, read, and write English, while continuing to learn academic content in Spanish.

4. Adding additional supports for students that will:

- Focus on restorative practice and social-emotional learning
- Continue the need for social-emotional learning supports to ensure the District adequately addresses the issues hindering students from achieving academic success.
- Have added counselors and mental health support services to help students return to an emotionally safe place where they can talk about issues in a calm way and join instruction.
- Have expanded specialized services with instructional coaches and behavioral specialists.
- The District has added 137 reading teachers and interventionists over the past two years to ensure that every child is school ready and reading by the 3rd grade.

5. Pre-Kindergarten education program

Rochester's Pre-K programs are nationally recognized and are consistently ranked among the highest in the U.S., for 18 consecutive years, dating back to 2001. These findings have been confirmed by rigorous, independent evaluations (Rochester Early Childhood Assessment Partnership or RECAP) conducted on Rochester's Pre-K system.

We'd like to thank the Governor's Office for recently awarding the City School District nearly \$2.1-million to increase access to its Pre-K education. This shows the State's commitment to our children and nationally ranked Pre-K programs. This is allowing the District to expand its three-year-old full-day programs.

6. Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses

Over the past year, the District has increased enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses by 25%. In 2018 – 19, the District offered 109 AP courses.

Room for growth and opportunities

While the District has reason to celebrate, graduation rates are still the lowest in the Big Five Districts. We will continue to maintain our laser-like focus on meeting the needs of every student; we cannot afford to have one child slip through the cracks. It takes families, the community, and our schools working together to make sure our children succeed.

Racial equity is a priority for the District. Providing quality education to each-and-every one of our students, and ensuring that all of our students see themselves in the curriculum and that racial equity and leadership for social justice is imperative.

Providing support to English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities is critical to the success of this student population. The needs of these students continues to grow, and the District is ensuring compliance with state and federal regulations/guidelines, and the cost of compliance continues to grow. The District has chosen to use very challenged fiscal resources to fund essential priorities including; reading interventionists, intervention teachers, special education teachers, English Language Learners, counselors, bilingual psychologists, bilingual content specialists, and social workers.

Budget

At this stage in the budget process, we are projecting a sizeable budget gap. Taking into consideration the Governor's executive budget and the potential usage of \$8-million of our Fund Balance. The goal of management is not to be reliant on Fund Balance as a means to balance our budget.

There are multiple factors that contribute to the District's budget gap and structural deficit. Without additional funding, the District will hurt the trajectory of recent achievements it has made. In order to continue to invest in student and school success, the District must address:

School Health Services and Professional Development

The Executive Budget calls for a \$1.2M reduction in the highly needed School Health Service that will provide support for our students. We are requesting that the State restore the \$1.2M reduction in School Health Service Aid.

Special Education

Providing high quality services and meeting all compliance regulations for Students with Disabilities is a high priority for the District. Funding is provided for Students with Disabilities through a federal entitlement grant associated with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Rochester is currently classified as a District in need for intervention under IDEA and is required to implement a corrective action plan.

Equity Plan

The State's Division of Budget requires equity among schools within each District. The Rochester City School District is in the process of developing a plan that will ensure it is meeting these requirements, and it will be submitted by the specified deadline.

Foundation Aid

The \$7.2M increase in Foundation Aid for the District is very refreshing and welcoming. We know that Foundation Aid is formula driven and is meant to reflect funding for students' needs and our District's ability to pay for the services to students. The 2019-20 year's 1.68% Foundation Aid increase over the current year funding includes a \$2.17M increase in Community School Set-aside. This reflects the State and the Governor's continued emphasis on the need for more Community Schools, but it does not give us flexibility in order to incur costs to maximize student achievement.

While we appreciate the increase in Foundation Aid, it is not adequate to fund all the services needed by the District to maintain the current level of educational services that are delivered to students, nor does it support any additional services needed to lift the level of performance of our students. RCSD is highly reliant on State funding since it is a fiscally dependent District in a struggling City. We continue to encounter the unique needs of the population, including hurricane-impacted students who have relocated to Rochester, ELL students, and the need for expanded services for those requiring translator services. In addition, we are facing challenges with recruiting certificated bilingual teachers to deliver instruction in the language that the students can understand.

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Career and Technical Education (CTE) continues to be a significant driver that contributes to the District graduation rate. We continue to introduce students to CTE at the 9th grade level and we've seen a positive response through course enrollment. We continue to modify our course offerings to ensure students are gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to be certificated in several job areas. There is a great need for these courses in our schools and the need to fund these courses is immense. Currently, the State only reimburses the Big 5 Districts through Special Service Aid for costs incurred for 10th grade through 12th grade.

We are asking the State for the following:

- Increase in the per pupil allocation to \$4,200 from the \$3,900, which has been the long-standing amount for several years. This increase was first introduced in a One House Bill several years ago. This would increase Rochester's Special Service Aid by \$0.3M.
- An expansion in the Special Service Aid reimbursement to include 9th grade, which will result in \$3.1M in additional aid to Rochester. For the past three years, NYSED has been collecting data on the 9th grade CTE enrollment from the Big 5 Districts.

Charter Schools

Charter School enrollment has risen significantly over the past ten years from 1,175 in 2008 – 09 to 6,058 in 2018 – 19, and is anticipated to be 6,194 in 2019 – 20; this accounts for 20% of our student population. For the 2019 – 20 school year, the District is expected to pay out \$14,280 in tuition for each RCSD student attending charter school, plus an additional \$4 million premium for students with disabilities.

Closing

In summary, we deeply appreciate the support of public education and the Rochester City School District, but the current proposed budget does not provide the adequate funding level to meet the ever- growing needs of the students we serve. The District is fully aware of the needs of its students, families, teachers, and the community as a whole and we are doing our best to ensure we are meeting the needs of our students. The Rochester City School District is on the move. Community stakeholders are involved in helping us make sure we have high quality schools and programs and services to build stronger schools. We're utilizing our resources and talented staff to ensure students are college, career, work, and life ready. There's not an achievement gap in Rochester, there is an opportunity gap. This effort takes a village, but what a privilege it is for all of us to serve children, families, and the community.

Again thank you for your time and consideration in helping us to move the Rochester School District so we can reach every student, by face and name, to and through graduation.