

Why are RCSD board members highest paid in state, by far?

The blistering assessment of the Rochester City School District by a state-appointed watchdog raises the question: Why are we paying the school board members so much?

Of the roughly 700 school boards in New York, only a handful pay their elected representatives, and the rate of pay in Rochester tops the list by a mile.

Arguably the worst school district in the state pays its board commissioners the most.

Six of the seven members on the Rochester Board of Education are paid \$27,033, according to the district's budget. The seventh, President Van White, takes a salary of \$34,758.

Consider that school board members in Buffalo are paid \$5,000 apiece. In Syracuse, the salary for board members is \$7,500. The school board in Yonkers voted last year to pay its president a retroactive \$15,000 stipend. In New York City, board members were stripped of their \$15,000 pay when public schools fell under mayoral control in 2002.

It is not unusual for elected board members of large school districts to be paid. A 2010 report published by the National School Boards Association found that just over half — 53.5 percent — of school board members in districts nationwide serving more than 15,000 students received a salary.

But the vast majority of them reported receiving under \$15,000 a year in pay. Less than 8 percent reported they made more.

With its roughly 30,000 students, Rochester is a large school district around these parts. But it barely cracks the top 150 nationwide in terms of enrollment. So why are its board members paid more than most in the biggest districts around the country?

The question is even more pertinent given the failings of the Rochester public school system outlined in the report by Jaime Aquino, the so-called “distinguished educator” appointed by the state Education Department to inject some accountability into the district.

of \$34,000 today. Back then, board members were appointed by the mayor, rather than elected.

The rate of pay stayed flat until 1970, when City Council, under pressure from the school board, amended the charter to allow the council to set the salaries of school board members. That year, City Council voted to raise the pay of school board members to \$5,000 from \$1,200, and to set the salary of the president at \$7,500.

Nine years later, when school board members began griping again about their pay, City Council punted on the matter. After getting such an earful during a public hearing on a proposal to raise school board members' salaries, the council amended the charter again to allow the Board of Education to set its own pay.

In June 1979, the board voted to raise its salaries to \$7,500 for members and \$10,000 for the board president. Two years later, in December 1981, the board gave itself another raise, to \$10,000 for members and \$12,500 for the president.

Six years later, in May 1986, the board voted itself another increase, setting the salary of board members at \$15,000 and \$17,000 for the president.

“Board President Rachael Hedding said the board decided on raises because it had not received a pay boost in five years and members' pay needed to be comparable to that of other part-time elected officials in the city and county,” the *Democrat and Chronicle* reported at the time.



RCSD Board Vice President Willa Powell speaks to Van White, board president, during a board meeting.
MAX SCHULTE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

His assessment focused on broad issues, including curriculum, policies, practices and leadership, and concluded that the district needed “a total reset” of the way it operates to have a chance at functioning adequately.



David Andreatta

Aquino never mentioned pay for board members in his report. But perhaps it is time to rethink their compensation.

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Rochester Board of Education members have a long history of receiving outsized paychecks.

School board members were first paid for their service in 1905, when the salary was set under the city charter at \$1,200. That’s roughly the equivalent

Those salaries would remain for at least 20 years. At some point thereafter, in the late 2000s, the board reportedly tied its pay to 75 percent of that of City Council and its president.

The current city budget lists the salaries for each council member at \$34,994 and for the president at \$44,994, although not all of them receive those rates of pay because some longtime members have declined raises throughout the years.

Acquino’s report didn’t blame the school board for all the district’s ills. Surely there’s blame to go around. But the report accused the school board of micromanaging the district to the point of infusing dysfunction into the school system.

Mayor Lovely Warren called the report “sobering” and said it should be the “basis of important community conversations.” School board salaries should be one of those conversations.

City Council is already talking about amending the charter to clarify its responsibilities with regards to the district’s budget, after balking at passing the district’s \$915 million spending plan earlier this year. Why not add school board members’ salaries to the agenda?

Perhaps, with some serious and thoughtful study, a sound argument could be made that increasing the salaries could attract more capable candidates to run for the board. The job, after all, is stressful and thankless and critical to the future of our region.

As it stands, though, the rate of pay for this board and its members smacks of rewarding incompetence — and has for a long time.

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