

## RCS D tackles budget gap, urges bigger classes, building closings

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The Rochester City School District must consider increasing student-teacher ratios, closing buildings and scaling back on extended-day programs if it hopes to tackle a growing structural budget deficit, the administration told school board members earlier this month.

Rising personnel costs and charter school enrollment and increases in the number of English language learners and students with disabilities, among other things, have put Rochester and other large urban districts in New York into a perennial budget crunch. For the last several years the administration and school board have largely papered over that gap with increasing infusions from the fund balance while at the same time adding reading teachers, social workers and guidance counselors, among others, to address students' mounting needs.

cancies long-term.

■ **School and program consolidation (\$22 million).** There are “underutilized schools and under-filled classrooms” throughout the district, including at programs with uncertain “academic return on investment.” The NorthSTAR program, for instance, cost \$81,000 for each of the 19 students it served.

■ **Maximize transportation efficiencies (\$33 million).** The district pays \$7.66 per day for its secondary students to ride Regional Transit Service buses, more than double the cost of the all-access daily passes available to the public. Younger students are transported across the city among home, school and after-school centers with scant regard for neighborhood boundaries.

■ **“Redesigning” expanded-day and summer school programs (\$25 million).** The district offers these programs much more liberally than is required by state law for schools under state accountability decrees. The memo from Mascitti-Miller and Sewell recommends “redesign(ing) these programs to be more efficient and

The fund balance is nearly depleted, and the budget gap continues to increase. The district projects it will hit \$99 million in five years and \$186 million in 10 years.

Deputy Superintendent Beth Mascitti-Miller and Chief Financial Officer Everton Sewell presented a grim checklist of “action strategies” they said the board must either adopt or replace with other ideas:

■ **A “staffing true-up”** (savings of up to \$60 million in five years). Rochester has lower student-teacher and student-administrator ratios than Buffalo, Syracuse and Yonkers. While its starting salary is comparatively low, Rochester pays a lot for additional work such as summer school and after-school programs and also hires many substitute teachers where it cannot fill va-

Association or the Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester, both of which have contracts expiring in June.

RTA President Adam Urbanski said that while the district has leeway within the current contract to increase class sizes, it wouldn't be “a wise decision.”

“If we're struggling already with class sizes that are lower than what's permissible, increasing class sizes is hardly a strategy to improve student performance,” he said. Alternately he offered the idea of an early retirement incentive for staff so that older, costlier employees could be taken off the books and replaced with younger, less expensive ones.

The 2019-20 budget season promises to be challenging for several reasons. An expected special education consent decree will have additional costs built in. Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams is leaving at the end of January, leaving interim Superintendent Dan Lowengard to propose a budget.

impactful ... (then) reinvesting this resource into improvement of effective first teaching.”

Other ideas include lobbying the state for more funding, reviewing the use of contract goods and services and continuing to pare central office down. Collectively the actions would save between \$75 million and \$187 million over five years, according to the memo.

They are listed as “potential ideas,” but the memo warns that if the board rejects any of the offered solutions, “it will be necessary to substitute other potential ideas” from another list, including furloughs.

School Board President Van White said the most promising solution will be asking Albany for more money — not just a blank check, but for targeted purposes such as maintaining school improvement money for schools that have made demonstrable progress.

“When we put our hand out to Albany we have to have a specific tool that they know works, (such as) the EPO at East High School,” he said. “We’re going to have to have a targeted arrangement that is justified.”

Some of the proposed changes would require negotiation, or at least coordination, with either the Rochester Teachers

City Council has pledged closer scrutiny of the school budget after a confrontation at City Hall last summer over the district’s fiscal responsibility. That skepticism was borne out in a consultant’s report showing a lack of planning and frugality in the RCSD budget office.

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**Rochester school board Vice President Willa Powell speaks to Van White, board president, during a meeting.** MAX SCHULTE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO