

Monroe County to increase special ed funds for pre-K

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Monroe County Executive Cheryl Dinolfo on Tuesday proposed a 15 percent rate hike for preschool special education providers, a welcome boost that could have significant practical and political implications for other parts of the deeply flawed system for providing services to young children.

Pre-K special education is coordinated by school districts and funded in large part by Monroe County; Early Intervention is the same thing but for children up to age 3 and is coordinated by the county but funded mostly by New York state. Both systems are in crisis, with rates far below the cost of providing services.

The county came under fire in December after creating a waiting list for children in Early Intervention, a proposal it quickly rescinded. It instead shifted



Najir Jones, 4, tries on a hat in October 2018 during a program at the Mary Cariola Children's Center for occupational and physical therapy and speech therapy, among other things. CARLOS ORTIZ/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO

some clerical workers to help alleviate an intake bottleneck in Early Intervention. That solution that remains in place, county spokesman Jesse Sleezer said.

In announcing the pre-K rate increase — which the county estimates will cost about \$600,000 to \$800,000 — Dinolfo called on the state government to do the same for Early Intervention.

“The county is doing our part to increase preschool special education rates by 15 percent,” she said in a statement. “Now the state must follow our lead by matching a 15 percent increase for its equally important Early Intervention program rates this year.”

Pete Nabozny, early education policy director for The Children's Agenda and a lead advocate for increased funding, said Dinolfo's action was “definitely a good thing” and hoped it would spur action in Albany.

“It's really significant that the county, in the middle of the budget year, would put in a 15 percent rate increase,” he said. “Now something has to happen at the state level to fix the EI system. ... The solution isn't to keep both systems inadequate in parity.” Of the two,

do need to run a business and the rates for pre-K are significantly higher than for EI,” Nabozny said. “But maybe there's a way to hire additional staff and grow the overall staff for service providers. ... Does this allow us to get more people working?”

Gov. Andrew Cuomo's state budget includes a 5 percent rate increase for most Early Intervention providers, but not for service coordination, the immediate problem for Monroe County. The Assembly and Senate counter-proposals take a somewhat different strategic tack that also would involve slight increases.

The Children's Agenda has called for rate increases between 21 percent and 41 percent based on the actual cost of service provision. The 15 percent figure in Monroe County was benchmarked against other upstate counties, particularly Erie and Onondaga, Sleezer said.

He called it “an appropriate number for this year” but said it could rise again next year or in the future.

Early Intervention is in a more precarious position. The Keuka Lake School at the Arc of Yates recently joined the ranks of providers that have pulled out after projecting a \$43,000 deficit in the program for 2019.

“The kids truly need the services and the state has cut our other funding to the point that we can no longer afford to absorb the loss in this program,” Vice President of Finance Tammy Raub wrote in an email in January.

An unintended consequence of the higher pre-K rates could be an increased exodus of specialists from Early Intervention, especially since pre-K programs run through school districts can offer more attractive benefits.

“I’m a bit concerned that the case mix could shift, because these providers

Monroe County Democrats, including county executive hopeful Adam Bello, praised the news but said Dinolfo can’t credibly claim to be leading on the issue after advocates, and Democrats, have been asking for help for years.

“While the end result is something we all have worked for, the process was needlessly drawn out,” Legislature Minority Leader Cynthia Kaleh said in a statement. “I would suggest that when she is thanked for taking action, she apologize for taking so long.”

The funding crisis for Early Intervention and pre-K special education is a blemish on the otherwise positive state of affairs for local early education, both in the city and suburbs. The Rochester City School District recently announced that all city 3-year-olds are eligible for full-day prekindergarten.

JMURPHY7@Gannett.com