

## **RCSD budget: Here are the key takeaways**

### **Public hearings are scheduled for April**

#### **Justin Murphy**

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester City School District on Tuesday released its draft 2019-20 budget, including \$925 million in spending for its 25,000 students and 6,200 employees. The district had to close a gap of about \$40 million, and do so without much reliance on fund balance, as has been the practice in recent years.

There will be public hearings April 2 and 11. Here are five takeaways from the preliminary document:

#### **Services for students are being cut**

There's no way around it: If the draft budget is adopted mostly intact, some students will suffer.

They'll get less tutoring in high school and shorter school days. There will be fewer people combating chronic absenteeism and less robust specialized programs for the most vulnerable students.

Summer internships at city libraries will be gone.

Interim Superintendent Daniel Lowengard said Tuesday it's a matter of aligning spending with revenues: "It was needed funds; it was for the students and all that. But that's what a structural deficit looks like."

#### **There will be layoffs — but not 326 of them**

The budget eliminates positions for 194 teachers, 50 administrators, 54 paraprofessionals and teacher assistants and 27 civil service positions. That represents about 5 percent of the current district workforce, the largest cut in many years.

Much of the reduction, though, can be accomplished through attrition or transfers. The 40 special education administrators whose jobs are being eliminated could apply for other positions to which some of their duties are being reassigned.

#### **Special education will be shaken up again**

"I prefer not to (use so much fund balance), but if I have to, I'll choose to make the investment in our future," board President Van White said then.

This year the fund balance sum is just \$8 million, and Lowengard said the district needs to wean itself off that highly perishable pot of money.

#### **Clash with the city may be coming**

City Council already had been promising close attention to the 2019-20 budget process after nearly rejecting the district's spending plan last year.

Then, Mayor Lovely Warren last week took the unusual step of demanding certain line items in the RCSD budget relating to community schools despite lacking the statutory authority to do so. The district demurred, and in fact cut the community schools budget due to an expired grant. For both those reasons, smooth passage of the RCSD budget at City Council — scheduled for June 18 at the moment — is far from assured.

#### **Who's in charge?**

Funding gaps and teacher layoffs are nothing new, but this budget season introduces a new dynamic: leadership in the district that is in flux and, increasingly, called into question.

Lowengard is serving as interim superintendent, and the district hopes to have a permanent hire by the summer. A majority of seats on the school board are up for election in the June primary, and White is running for City Court judge.

Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino may be a non-voting member of the board, but his report on the district is necessarily the starting point for any budget priorities.

On top of all that, Warren and other community leaders in the ROC the Future coalition are asking state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia to join them in considering new governance models for the district. No one has mentioned anything specific yet.

For the third time in five years, special education is undergoing a major redesign, this time under the supervision of the Empire Justice Center and a forthcoming consent decree.

In short, Central Office is reclaiming responsibility for running many special education meetings, and the continuum of services being offered has been reevaluated to ensure that students aren't being given dead-end placements, especially those in restrictive settings.

Advocates have said for years that the changes they're demanding won't come cheap, but the district actually cut its special education budget. Lowengard said Tuesday he believes the consent decree changes can be accomplished with existing funding.

### **Austerity budgeting is back**

In 2018 the district was facing a projected \$65 million budget gap. Not only did it manage to close that gap; it also added hundreds of positions for reading teachers, social workers and others.

To do so it took \$20 million from fund balance, at least the fifth year in a row it had taken more than \$10 million from savings to plug a budget gap.

Suffice to say that the district leaders who actually oversee the spending of the 2019-20 budget likely will be a very different group than the ones putting it into place this spring.

[JMURPHY7@Gannett.com](mailto:JMURPHY7@Gannett.com)



**Van White said last year, when the district took \$20 million from the fund balance, that he'd "choose to make the investment in our future."** SHAWN DOWD/ ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE