

## 'If we don't change things now, then what are we doing?'

### RCSD makes third effort to reform special education

#### TIME TO EDUCATE

#### Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

For the third time in five years, the Rochester City School District is planning an overhaul of its troubled special education operation for 2019-20. The district — and some of its most prominent critics — believes this version might be different from the two that failed, but the path to implementation has not been smooth.

The plan was created by Kisha Morgan, executive director of special education, in conjunction with a community task force on the topic, including pending federal court plaintiffs at the Empire Justice Center. Crucially, its contents align with the recommendations of the state Education Department and Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino, among others.

Among the key provisions:

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#### TIME TO EDUCATE: CHANGE NOW

■ Reinstating “integrated coteach” (ICOT) classrooms, where general and special education teachers have joint responsibility for an integrated class of students with and without disabilities.

■ Providing most sorts of special education offerings — self-contained classrooms, a resource room, a consultant teacher and ICOT — in every building, rather than making students transfer schools to access the services they need.

■ Reforming the process behind committee on special education meetings, where students' individual special-ed plans are created, temporarily giving control of these crucial sessions to central office as a way to train assistant principals to do the work down the road.

The plan was nearly suffocated before it was launched. The initial district budget proposal included 10 fewer positions than the special ed plan called for; only after



**World of Inquiry special education teacher Megann Johnson answers Justice Jackson's question with Tray'Cee Jackson, Journey Cochran and Kaliana Affronti looking on. A general education teacher also works in the integrated co-taught class.** TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

and Buffalo,” he wrote. “The next few years will show if Rochester can become a model for reform, or simply keep pace with other struggling school districts.”

Board President Van White said he is confident that all seven board members are committed to fully funding the recommendations in Morgan's plan. He noted the recommendations were developed through a task force that the board created, co-chaired by former board member Melanie Funchess. “This has got to be priority number one,” White said. “There's a lot of priorities, but given the fact that over many decades we haven't appropriately resourced our children with special needs — it should be clear to (Lowengard) that we are wholly in support of making sure we can carry out the plan described in that consent decree.”

#### Rectifying past mistakes

a late infusion of \$5.9 million from the finalized state budget did interim Superintendent Dan Lowengard propose restoring eight of those positions, a number Morgan said can be made to work.

Some parts of Morgan's new vision have already borne fruit: A rescheduling of annual committee on special education (meetings, for example, cut the number of overdue meetings by 78 percent in 201819 .

Departments fighting for an increased budget allocation, of course, is not new. The district's commitment to solving longtime special education problems, though, is coming up for a formidable test.

Plenty of academic indicators in the district are unsatisfactory, but special education is one of the few places where the results are plainly noncompliant with state law. Too many students are classified as disabled; required notifications are ignored; crucial meetings are held without the right people present.

In an analysis of the 2019-20 budget for The Children's Agenda, Eamonn Scanlon noted an improving special education graduation rate in the district and said following best practices is essential to maintain that progress.

"Rochester's special education system has gone from a place of near collapse to a struggling system on par with Syracuse

The reintroduction of integrated co-teaching in elementary school will be perhaps the most visible change. It has the support of classroom teachers like Megann Johnson and Jamie Schenk, who co-teach kindergarten at World of Inquiry School 58. Johnson is a special education teacher and Schenk is general education, but both said they view all the students in the class as their joint responsibility.

"Everybody benefits from learning we are all unique humans who approach life in a different way," Schenk said.

That might mean one student getting more personal space on the carpet during story time, or another needing headphones before heading to the noisy gymnasium.

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*"Everybody benefits from learning we are all unique humans who approach life in a different way."*

**Jamie Schenk**

*co-teacher for kindergarten at World of Inquiry School 58*

**Jamie Schenk works with a small group of her kindergartners on writing words. The class was broken up into small groups with students rotating through teachers and independent work. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**