

City students drive revenue for suburban schools

Urban-Suburban program brings in state funds for districts struggling with declining enrollment

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Every morning, Mahogany Lewis' daughter wakes up before dawn to catch a 6:25 a.m. bus on Lyell Avenue. More than an hour later she arrives in East Rochester, in time for first period at 7:45 a.m.

Lewis puts the girl through that trial because she believes the Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer Program, now in its 54th year, provides a better opportunity.

"I think it's good the children can get to know people outside of their own culture and learn about diversity," Lewis said.

It's good for the school district as well. Beyond the time-honored goal of increasing racial diversity, the Urban-Suburban program also provides significant state revenue for suburban school districts struggling with declining enrollment — money that otherwise would be going to the city school district.

For every Rochester student the East Rochester Union Free School District welcomed in 2017-18, it also received \$5,414 in additional state aid funding. That amounted to more than 2.5% of its annual budget.

Across Monroe County, the 13 participating school districts took in \$7.1 million in state revenue in 2017-18, according to state data. That is \$8,800 on average per student that the districts would not have received if the student were a resident.

"I feel like it's a good program and it really does give our children an opportunity," Lewis said. "But my personal feeling is, I wish the money we give to suburban schools (went) back to the city schools so our students can have the same opportunity.

"Then we wouldn't have the children travel an hour and a half on the bus early in the morning,



Brielle Burgess checks her phone and says goodbye to her parents, Ebony and William, before heading out to catch her bus. Brielle, who attends the school through the Urban-Suburban Program, takes several buses to get to Pittsford Sutherland High School, where she is a 10th grader. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

where they're tired before they get to school and when they get home they're exhausted."

Students and revenue for shrinking districts

The chief virtue of the Urban-Suburban program is an obvious one, according to its supporters: an opportunity for both city and suburban students to study in a more integrated environment, learning from one another as classmates.

Tens of thousands of students have been affected in the program's long history. More recently, though, a financial calculation has emerged as well.

The additional revenue that comes with the students is a welcome boost at a time of flat or declining enrollment in most districts. For the median participating district it represents nearly 1 percent of the overall budget; and the three districts with the greatest Urban-Suburban enrollment — West Irondequoit, Pittsford and Fairport — all took in more than \$1 million in 2017-18.

Urban-Suburban leaders insist the financial benefit plays no part in their consideration of the program's value.

"The fiscal piece is not a conversation," Penfield Superintendent Thomas Putnam, a co-chair of the Urban-Suburban governance committee, said. "It's about the virtues of the program and how we are making sure students coming in from the city can have a positive experience."

The top-enrolling districts, including Penfield, have been a part of the program since the 1960s, well before the current funding formula was developed. Newer adopters, however, took definite notice of the financial benefits when considering joining in the last few years.

"If you look at it from a sustainability standpoint, it starts to make sense for some districts," East Rochester interim Superintendent Richard Stutzman said in January 2015, a month before that district joined the program. "If people really took a hard look at our numbers and what we stand to gain out of this; most rational people would say it's worth a shot."

The money comes from the state, not RCSD; it is similar to the arrangement with charter schools, where money RCSD would otherwise have received is diverted.

The city school district does pay, though, providing transportation for the 800 or so students leaving its borders every day at a cost of several million dollars.

Putnam pointed out that local districts don't make the rules around how money gets distributed.

"If I could rewrite all the state aid rules, we'd have a lot of fun with that," Putnam said.

Rochester School Board President Van White said it is the loss of talented and motivated students, rather than money, that concerns him most. Urban-Suburban students are often among the highest achieving in their schools outside the city, in part because they're hand-selected and can be returned to the city if their grades falter.

"Some of our most talented, committed parents (and students) are leaving the district, and I understand why," said White, who grew up in Brighton. "But part of what makes a district is the people in it. And for every

engaged parent who stays in the district, that has a ripple effect.”

Mahogany Lewis used to have two children in Urban-Suburban, one in East Rochester and one in Spencerport. She pulled her son from Spencerport this year after an incident she perceived as racist.

With that in mind, she now takes a more cynical view of the program.

“Anything with money — you know it’s a benefit behind it,” Lewis said. “It’s just like with the jail and prison system. Every person is a dollar amount.”

By 6 a.m. on weekdays, the kitchen of Ebony Burgess’ home off Hudson Avenue in Rochester is already a bustle of activity.

Her older daughter, Brielle, has to leave the house by 6:15 a.m. to catch two city buses and arrive at Pittsford Sutherland High School by 7:30 a.m. Her younger daughter, Kamille, gets on a yellow bus at about 6:35 a.m. and arrives at Barker Road Middle School in Pittsford about an hour later.

There is one yellow bus for younger Pittsford-bound students on the east side of the city and another on the west side. If they fall asleep on the long ride, the other children shake them awake when the bus gets to their school.

“It’s a lot for a child,” Ebony Burgess said. The amount of revenue districts generate from the program, she said, “is even more reason for them to be making sure our kids are in an environment they feel is inclusive.

“Because we have something to bring to the district. We’re bringing something to the table – not only our kids, but money”, Burgess said.

Follow the money

The funding formula for Urban-Suburban is a matter of state law. In brief, it says that the receiving (suburban) school district gets the state per-pupil rate in effect for RCSD, minus what it would have received for one of its own resident children.

Those state rates are based on a variety of demographic factors. Since RCSD has much greater concentrations of students with disabilities, English language learners and students in poverty, its per-pupil number from the state is significantly higher than in the suburbs: \$10,600, compared to a median of \$3,700 in the participating suburban districts.

The difference between those two numbers represents a profit margin on each Rochester student who enrolls in a suburban school. Add in another calculation based on foundation aid, and suburban districts took in a median sum of \$8,800 for each of the 807 participating city students in 2017-18.

The higher sum is meant to provide for the costly services many students in Rochester require. In general, though, it is not those students whom suburban districts choose to welcome into their schools.

Suburban districts also do not receive local property tax revenues from the families of non-residents, of course. But districts have been explicit about taking in students only when class sizes and other considerations allow them to do so without increasing expenses.

“The selection process gives the district significant latitude to select students who can enter HFL (Honeoye Falls-Lima) with minimal transition needs and supports,” a task force in the district wrote prior to adoption. “The intent is to enroll general education students without materially increasing costs.”

An anonymous administrator said the same thing more plainly to Kara Finnigan, a professor at the University of Rochester’s Warner School of Education, for a book she co-authored, *Striving in Common*: “Sometimes you

take (city students) in the younger grades, and if they end up ... needing special education, they can't receive it here, they have to go back to their home district.”

Putnam said he believes the percentage of Penfield Urban-Suburban students with disabilities is close to his district's average of 8%, if less than the RCSD average of 21%.

Penfield is selecting more students at younger ages, he said, in large part to make them a part of the district before they may be classified as special education.

“It's hard to say we're getting the cream of the crop when it comes to first graders,” Putnam said.

Lottery not considered

Rochester's inter-district transfer program is unique in the country in operating through a selection process rather than a random lottery.

Lesli Myers, the superintendent in Brockport and Putnam's fellow co-chair of the program governance committee, said the interview process is important in making sure students will succeed in their new schools — in particular, that they'll be able to persevere through the challenge of transportation.

“If we were solely doing a lottery, we'd lose that extra piece about motivation,” she said.

Other administrators, have given more troubling explanations. In a separate 2009 study by Finnigan, some suburban district leaders, speaking anonymously, said they look for things like an intact two-parent household and a clean disciplinary record. One administrator admitted to screening out a child whose parents asked what supports were in place for black children.

“I think districts (elsewhere in the country) have used the application itself as a way to know whether families are committed,” Finnigan said. “The idea that this particular situation, in terms of busing, is one parents won't recognize — it's a pretty well known issue that people have known for a long time.”

The program has attempted to move in the direction of greater equity. This year, suburban districts were presented with only a small, randomized stack of applications from which to choose their students rather than poring through scores of students to select just one or two.

Myers said they also would consider translating the application form into Spanish to make it accessible to non-English speaking families.

“It's not a perfect process,” Myers said. “But I feel good about the direction we're evolving in.”

Finnigan pointed out that RCSD wouldn't be losing so much state funding on Urban-Suburban if it were a twoway program, with suburban students attending city schools as well.

More generally, she said, a broader discussion about equity and race is needed to address the very segregation that Urban-Suburban was founded to combat in 1965.

Part of the problem is that we don't have anything that addresses the boundaries of the districts themselves that have caused the segregation we have,” she said. “Urban-Suburban has been trying to do what it can to move across boundaries, but it's not enough, in the segregated community we live in, to conquer it.”

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Brielle Burgess walks down Dunn Street in Rochester to get to her bus stop with a neighbor and friend, Anna Quinones. Both are taking an RTS bus to the downtown Transit Center, where Brielle will catch another bus to take her to Pittsford Sutherland Highland School. PHOTOS BY TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Brielle Burgess, who is in the Urban-Suburban Program, is in 10th grade at Pittsford Sutherland High School. Here she boards a bus to the Transit Center.