

Schools may close as city enrollment declines

With fewer students, RCSD faces hard choices

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At his final school board meeting last month, departing Rochester City School District Interim Superintendent Daniel Lowengard delivered the kind of difficult analysis a permanent leader might shy away from.

Specifically, he said, the district will need to seriously consider closing four elementary school buildings, with the popular and high-performing Francis Parker School 23 in Park Avenue at the head of the list from a facilities standpoint.

“It’s easy for a person leaving the school district to put it out there,” Lowengard conceded. “With all that said, and me getting out of town ... it’s a good time to start looking at all our facilities.”

Lowengard shared actual and projected district enrollment trends, which by now are familiar: down from about



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33,000 students a decade ago to about 26,000 now, with an expected drop to about 21,500 by 2028-29.

He then shared the district’s internal assessments of its facilities, based on both age and structural integrity of the building and also characteristics like lot size, recreation facilities and building technology.

By those grades, schools 23 and 44, in the 19th Ward, had the lowest scores by far, about 37 out of 100. Two others, schools 43 and 25 on Lyell Avenue and North Goodman, are also well below the district standard.

“One of the things we need to do over time is make sure we’re balancing the special needs population,” he said. “We no longer can have a couple of (high schools) be great choices and the rest of them are in trouble.”

District spokesman Carlos Garcia stressed that the district and school board have made no decisions on school closures or anything else. The question is tied up with the student placement policy, state transportation funding, the new special education consent decree and a host of other factors.

At the same time, Lowengard said, the district must level out the distribution of students with disabilities and English language learners among high schools. That would mean significant changes to School of the Arts, the favored choice of middle-class families, and a school where special needs students are conspicuously absent.

At the high school level, he shared data showing the proportion of students with disabilities and English language learners at every school. The disparities are stark.

At four high schools, about a quarter of students have disabilities, while at School of the Arts and School Without Walls it is 8% and 10%.

The gap is even wider for English language learners. Monroe High School has 41% compared to 3% at School of the Arts. Unsurprisingly, the city schools with more special needs students are the ones in state receivership.

“The bottom line is, we’re losing kids and enrollment and we’re going to have to take a look in the long run at how we’re utilizing our facilities,” he said. “Clearly if we continue to lose enrollment this way, we’re going to have to make tough decisions.”

Regarding the student demographics at the secondary level, Garcia said: “It’s an equity issue, is how we’re looking at it. ... That’s not a secret. We’ve been talking about that for years.”

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Daniel Lowengard was interim superintendent of the RCSD. JAMIE GERMANO/ ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE