

Few changes in city school budget

District chooses to plan conservatively while state funding remains a question

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Interim Rochester Superintendent Linda Cimusz Monday presented a \$870 million budget proposal devoid of significant changes from last year, saying the district should continue to follow its current strategy for incremental progress.

Without a permanent superintendent in place or a final funding sum from the state, the district chose to budget conservatively. Cimusz' plan largely follows the preliminary picture that former superintendent Bolgen Vargas presented in November.

The proposal includes a \$24 million gap; the hope is that additional state funding will cover most of it.

Unlike the past several years, there are no planned expansions of extended day learning, the arts or early learning. The proposal — at least until more state funding comes down — uses \$11 million of fund balance and has no contingency money included. That contingency money has come in handy in recent years.

Enrollment is expected to shrink to 27,611, down 17 percent over 10 years. Charter school enrollment is expected to rise to 4,629, with tuition costs rising from \$60 million to \$71 million. The proposal eliminates 35 staff positions, most of which would be covered through attrition.

The most striking news Monday night had to do with the budget for the current year rather than next year.

The 2015-16 budget included plans that were meant to save \$40.5 million through savings in special education, transportation and personnel costs, including substitute teachers. The actual savings over the year, however, have been just \$20.5 million.

A projected \$2.7 million savings in transportation instead became a \$5.1 million deficit thanks to an unpopular last-minute deal with Rochester-Genesee Regional Transportation Authority. Savings of \$3 million in special education, \$2.5 million for substitute teachers and \$7 million for central office spending similarly failed to materialize.

It remains to be seen how much of that money can be recouped through various austerity measures this school year and how much might carry over to 2016-17, said Lauren Poehlman, the district's new chief financial officer.

There will be public budget hearings March 22 and April 14. The board is supposed to adopt a budget May 10, then send it to the City Council for final approval.

"I already know we're going to get beat up pretty bad by the community," Board Vice President Cynthia Elliott said. "We've got all this money, we're asking for more and more money, but academically we don't seem to be performing like we should."

East High School Superintendent Shaun Nelms also presented a budget proposal for that school under the University of Rochester partnership. That proposal calls for a \$1.7 million reduction from the 2015-16

budget, partly through lower-than-expected costs and partly through a reduction in professional development spending.

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