

Hillside schools program expands

Gates Chili at-risk students get support

JUSTIN MURPHY

@CITIZENMURPHY

A comprehensive support program for high school students at risk of dropping out is expanding to the Gates Chili Central School District, a sure indicator of the growing impact of poverty in the suburbs.

The program, Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection, identifies students struggling in school, most of whom are poor, and surrounds them with support, including a personal advocate at their school, tutoring, job and college preparation skills and mentoring.

Many students are then hooked up with jobs at Wegmans, the University of Rochester or other program partners.

The program serves about 2,000 Rochester students and also operates in Buffalo, Syracuse and Prince George's County, Maryland. Since its founding in 1987, though, poverty has transcended municipal lines and emerged as a significant problem for many suburban school districts, Gates Chili chief among them.

Forty-two percent of children in Gates Chili qualified for free or reduced lunch in 2013-14 — nowhere near the Rochester School District's 85 percent rate, but more than double its 2003-04 rate of 19 percent.

In the suburbs, only East Rochester (47 percent) and East Irondequoit (52 percent) have greater proportions of poor children.

Hillside has been at Greece Arcadia High School for three years, serving about 30 students, but Gates Chili will be the first suburban district to participate as a whole. There will be 30 spots

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Roderick Green, left, and Kimberle Ward

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KIMBERLE WARD

GATES CHILI SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENT

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for Gates Chili ninthgraders this year with the goal of keeping them from dropping out before graduation.

It is part of a broader effort by the district to keep up with its students' mounting needs. It has added social workers and psychologists, instituted a credit recovery program and created a family and community engagement position in the administration.

"We know there are pockets throughout Gates and Chili that have high poverty issues, and we're hitting them straight on," Superintendent Kimberle Ward said. "We never know what our students are carrying with them when we walk through the doors, and we need to be sensitive to that." Roderick Green, the program's executive director for strategic growth and expansion, said there also have been discussions with other local suburban districts, as well as rural districts like Dansville and Lyons. Part of the appeal in smaller districts, he said, is that improvement in a few dozen students has a proportionately greater impact on the school as a whole.

"With 30 students at Gates Chili, we could provide a lift of 4 percent to 6 percent in the graduation rate, versus in Rochester where you need so much more concentration to move that number up," Green said.

It costs about \$3,700 to enroll a student in the program for one year. Gates Chili and Hillside will each pay half, Green said.

JMURPHY7@Gannett

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