

Magnet schools supported

Suburban, city leaders like blended institutions

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A number of suburban and city education leaders Thursday expressed their support for Great Schools For All, a local movement toward integrated, crossdistrict schools of choice that has been gaining momentum the last few months.

The volunteer organization is trying to establish one or more “Breakthrough Schools” that would have unique specialties and welcome students from the city of Rochester as well as its suburbs. There would be a cap on the number of poor students in any one school to ensure socioeconomic diversity.

Research shows that a high concentration of poor students in a school leads almost inevitably toward worse outcomes for all students. Alternately, all students do better in a socioeconomically balanced setting. Since Monroe County is one of the most racially segregated places in the country, there are relatively few well integrated schools now.

After several years of study and discussion, the Great Schools For All leaders now hope to help actually establish such a school within the next few years. As usual, that transition from words to action has involved a number of practical complications.

“Either the devil’s in the details or God’s in the details, or both at the same time,” John Wilkinson, a pastor at Third Presbyterian Church and one of the group’s leaders, said in an interview last month.

In particular, it is not yet clear how such schools would be structured, governed or financed. State legislation would likely be required for a school to take students from several districts, although the existing Urban-Suburban model could be built upon.

In the meantime, the organization has been working to build its case for integrated schools. In May, it released the results of a survey of 600 Monroe County residents showing broad support for a countywide magnet school. Eighty-seven percent of parents said they would at least consider a magnet school built around a theme, like arts or business education. Among suburban parents, 59 percent said they would consider sending their child to a magnet school where she would be a racial minority. There also was broad willingness to have a child ride a bus for up to 30 minutes. On the other hand, 93 percent of suburban parents said they are satisfied with their child’s current school, and about two-thirds thought their current school already was diverse enough. At an event Thursday and in materials distributed by the group, officials from the Rochester City School District, charter schools, a suburban school district and a local university all expressed support of the Great Schools For All agenda and discussed some existing efforts around the same concept. For instance, five 4-year-olds from West Irondequoit will be attending prekindergarten at School 50 in Rochester this fall, thanks to state integration funding the city school district received last year.

Joel Helfrich, co-founder of the proposed Rochester River School, said a number of suburban parents have told him they would like to send their children to his charter school, if and when it opens. It would begin with kindergarten students, but Helfrich suggested an eventual high school could be a countywide magnet school.

In a statement, Rochester School Board President Van White touted a potential military academy as “a natural Breakthrough School.” A College at Brockport representative indicated interest in the college “adopting a school” in the city, possibly a diverse magnet school.

Perhaps the closest thing currently to the proposed Breakthrough Schools is Genesee Community Charter School on the Rochester Museum & Science Center campus. A third of its students are minorities and a quarter are economically disadvantaged; many come from the suburbs, which is allowed for charter schools.

School leader Lisa Wing said she thinks her school could serve as a model for a well-integrated Breakthrough School.

“While we wish and hope we could secure that dynamic within the charter school model, we support the idea of diverse schools for all children,” she said.

Great Schools For All has hired a consultant who will help them shore up details around funding and governance, with the hope that a more established way forward will entice some school district or other organization to advance a firm proposal.

“We’re not interested in running a school; we’re interested in finding people who are,” Wilkinson said. “Somebody’s got to go first. We need to tee up the model.”

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Genesis Abram, far left, and Sierra Glasgow, far right, from Rochester Early College International High School, talk with Cassie Coon, center facing, and Sydney Cordona, back to camera, from Fairport High School.

MAX SCHULTE/@MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER “While we wish and hope we could secure that dynamic within the charter school model, we support the idea of diverse schools for all children.”

LISA WING

GENESEE COMMUNITY CHARTER SCHOOL

