

## **Troubled RCSD program has no permanent leader**

**S.T.A.R.**

## North S.T.A.R. deals with students coming from jail

**JUSTIN MURPHY**

@CITIZENMURPHY

Late last winter, the Rochester City School District received a damning report on its special education services. Among the most glaring problems was North S.T.A.R., a small program for students returning from jail or other out-of-district placements.

The program, report author Judy Elliott wrote, is “sub-par at best” and apparently in violation of federal law regarding students with disabilities. Elliott recommended a major review of North S.T.A.R. to determine whether it is worth continuing in its current form.

North S.T.A.R. still exists for now, but its greatest problems remain. For one thing, it has no permanent leader to begin the year.

Jason George, a veteran of special education in the district, is the acting administrator, RCSD special education director Sandy Simpson said, having been appointed to that position in July.

The program’s page on the district website offers little additional information. The homepage has not been updated since the 2015-16 school year. The “Staff” page is blank.

North S.T.A.R. typically only serves a few dozen students at a time, but they include the most vulnerable in the district — those returning from incarceration, a residential placement like Hillside or a psychiatric institution, among other things. They are all classified as special education.

In 2016-17, 85 percent

of the 73 students who spent time there were considered chronically absent. The program has dealt with serious turnover problems over its 15-year history, with staff often landing there by default rather than preference. The district in the past has not permitted journalists to visit the program, but when Elliott visited for her report, she found more staff than students and “virtually no instruction occurring.”

In the last three years, the program has switched from Hart Street to Martin Street and back to Hart Street. Neither location, both in converted office space off St. Paul St., is considered prime real estate.

Before he left in December 2015, former superintendent Bolgen Vargas urged the school board to create a “school of last resort” to include students from North S.T.A.R. and other programs, including LyncX

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**North S.T.A.R., located at 30 Hart St., received lackluster feedback on program success and is in violation with federal law regarding students with disabilities.** JAMIE GERMANO/  
@JGERMANO1/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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### S.T.A.R.

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Academy and All City High.

“Our current schools and programs are not well equipped to serve a small percentage of students with complex social and emotional needs,” he wrote. “We need a comprehensive new approach or significant modifications to current programs to improve outcomes for these vulnerable students.”

That suggestion was never taken up, however. Barbara Deane-Williams, the current superintendent, has said she wants to look at special education globally rather than focusing on one program in particular for improvement. The district’s written response to Elliott’s report did not mention North S.T.A.R. specifically.

“We’re continuing to look at how to better address mental health needs at a lot of our schools, not just North S.T.A.R.,” Simpson said.

In the fall of 2016, the district announced a partnership with Hope Hall, a small private school in Gates for children with disabilities. Hope Hall administrators and staff would help train

North S.T.A.R. teachers. “They have to rethink the way they teach,” Hope Hall founder and principal Diana Dolce said. “I’m not saying they’re bad teachers; I’m saying these are kids who learn differently, and they’re not being taught differently.” According to Simpson, though, that collaboration never got off the ground. The district instead has been working with Hillside since February and will continue for the rest of 2017. “It’s not that we wouldn’t work with (Dolce); she has a wonderful program and we’d be interested in connecting with her,” Simpson said. “But we’re going to try to develop a longer range plan, and not only for North S.T.A.R.” According to Simpson, Judy Elliott made a return visit to North S.T.A.R. after submitting her report and found a “night and day” difference. Staff have returned from last year, and new people have been added. “It’s early (in the school year), but we think it’s a good start,” Simpson said. “The spirits seemed really positive.”

*JMURPHY7@ [Gannett.com](mailto:JMURPHY7@Gannett.com)*