

\$1.2M effort collapses but hope remains for integration

Integration

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students at any higher grades failed.

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The lesson for some is that the state should stop wasting money on pipe

The New York State Education Department says it learned “valuable lessons” from a \$1.2 million socioeconomic integration grant given to the Rochester City School District. The goal was to get middle class children to attend Rochester’s impoverished schools.

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The net result was that ten preschoolers from Irondequoit went to pre-K at School 50. Efforts to enroll any suburban

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dreams. “Throughout the history of this nation, the overwhelming majority of wealthy and middle class, white parents in particular, have always made it clear that they are not willing to allow their children to attend schools with large numbers of poor, black and brown children,” said educational activist and former teacher Howard Eagle.

Others, including some suburban parents who participated in the integration pilot program, believe that socioeconomic integration remains a goal worth pursuing, even if the forces against it are strong.

Diversity means a better learning experience for all children, said Jacquelyn Woodard, whose son Keith was one of the West Irondequoit School District children who attended School 50’s pre-K program. “I grew up in a small community where I wasn’t exposed to different cultures and religions and for me it was very important that my son have exposure and be kind to everyone.”

Decades of research dating back to the 1966 “Equality of Educational Opportunity” Coleman Report, a survey requested by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, show that economically mixed schools result in much higher achievement rates for low-income students than schools that are majority poor. Many education leaders believe that all children benefit from interacting with classmates who come from circumstances different than theirs.

More than 4 million students in America are enrolled in school districts or charter schools with socioeconomic integration policies, according to The Century Foundation. This number has more than doubled since 2007.

Meanwhile, Monroe County has isolated its poor, black and Hispanic students in a way that is extreme, even for New York. In 2014, the UCLA Civil Rights Project declared New York’s schools the most segregated in the country. From 2015-2018, NYSED gave out million-dollar socioeconomic Integration Pilot Program grants to try to address the problem.

Rochester was the only participating district where the extraordinarily high percentage of poor students — 90 percent are economically disadvantaged according to the latest available data — made integrating within the district mathematically impossible.

“It is as structurally segregated as you can get,” said Lynette Sparks, one of the founders of Great Schools For All, a local non-profit organization that promotes socioeconomic integration.

Lack of pre-K in suburbs

Shortly after New York’s schools were declared to be the most segregated in the country, NYSED announced money for districts to pursue integration. “These grants will help reduce socioeconomic isolation in New York’s schools by giving districts support to pilot innovative programs to increase school diversity while improving student achievement,” said John King, who was state education commissioner at the time.

Rochester invested its grant money in efforts to bring suburban students to programs at School 12, School 50 and Edison. Parents in West Irondequoit quickly filled the spots offered to them at School 50 in 2016-17 and 2017-18. There is no pre-K in the West Irondequoit school district and there were waiting lists for the slots for the suburban students in each of the two years that the program ran. “It was a wonderful experience for all the kids involved,” said West Irondequoit Superintendent Jeff Crane. “I was sad to see the grant go away.”

At the preschool stage city schools are a success story, offering superior programming when compared to most suburbs. Test scores show the reverse at the elementary and high school level. That stark contrast is the reason that efforts to integrate at higher grades probably failed, said Jerome Underwood, the president and CEO of Action for a Better Community, and former RCSD administrator.

Budget documents show the district spent more than \$400,000 on an effort to draw students to Edison, including \$75,000 for the Advertising Council of Rochester. An advertising campaign isn’t going to convince a parent to send their child to a school where the graduation rate languishes below 50 percent, if they live in a suburban district where the rate is much higher, said Underwood.

Eagle says the expenditure was a criminal waste. “Considering the very serious and dire needs of huge numbers of RCSD students and families, it is absolutely criminal, completely disgraceful that they are literally squandering money on this sort of foolishness,” he said. “Not to mention the moral and ethical dilemma — relative to chasing, begging, and literally trying to bribe mainly middle and upper class white folks to send their children to school in the overwhelmingly black and brown, poverty-stricken RCSD.”

Some of the grant money may have ended up benefiting RCSD students. For example, in the 2016-17 school year the grant paid Center For Youth \$25,000. This money was not specifically for socioeconomic integration efforts, but rather for efforts to improve the school’s climate. Thousands of dollars from the grant were also spent on professional development for RCSD employees.

The district spent \$97,775 on salary and benefits for

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