

RCSD's special ed director will now head state program

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Rochester City School District special education director Chris Suriano has been named the head of special education for the entire state, following a vote from the state Board of Regents.

Suriano's previous job was also with the New York State Education Department as the western regional coordinator for special education quality assurance; one of his major responsibilities was supervising RCSD's strategy for students with disabilities. Former Superintendent Bolgen Vargas recruited him to the district in 2013.

Even more than other students, children with disabilities have long struggled to obtain a decent education in Rochester. Suriano began a systemic overhaul, focusing on expanding the continuum of services children can receive and improving the delivery of the services that already exist. He also increased access to career and technical training.

The August graduation rate for students with disabilities has increased over the last few years, from 19 percent in 2012 to 29 percent in 2015. Still, major problems remain.

The Empire Justice Center is threatening a lawsuit over district-wide failures in special education. Students with disabilities who do not speak English face a more complicated set of hurdles that the district has only just begun to dismantle.

The district is under an array of sanctions related to special education, some from the federal government and some from Suriano's new employer, the state education department.

In the press release, Board of Regents Vice Chancellor Andrew Brown said: "Christopher Suriano has spent his entire professional career working to support students with disabilities. I am confident he will provide the kind of leadership the department, our schools and the families of children with disabilities deserve."

In a letter to administrators, RCSD Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams thanked Suriano for his work in Rochester and said planning for the transition period has already begun.

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