

RCSD: Plan to fix special ed could save millions

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The Rochester City School District Thursday presented the outline of a plan it believes will help turn around special education, which was revealed in a recent district-commissioned report to be a disaster. A centralized team of administrators will review all new referrals and external placements; the report suggested the district could save tens of millions of dollars a year by placing students in indistrict programs rather than similar, more restrictive ones with outside agencies. Special education administrators, whom the report showed to be drowning in paperwork and endowed with a “pervasive lack of understanding of special education processes and procedures,” will have increased responsibility for compliance and quality control. A chief of special education, Sandy Simpson, already has been hired. There will be program review teams around certain student needs, such as mental health and speech. All students ages 15 and older will get a transition plan detailing what they’ll do after high school.

“Action has been taken; training has begun,” Simpson said Thursday.

The report, commissioned by the district and released this spring, revealed nearly universal dysfunction in the district’s special education department.

The author of the report, Judy Elliott, was at the meeting to present her work. She praised the district for what it has already done but made clear there is much more to do.

“The classrooms I went to, I would not put anybody’s child in,” she said.

Her main criticism was the district and school board’s apparent failure to use and act upon data, particularly regarding racial disparities.

Black students are more likely to be suspended, and to be classified under the catch-all “other health impairment.” Latino students are more likely to be classified with a learning disability, and white students more likely to be classified with autism.

“You’re not supposed to be able to predict your disability classification by race,” she said. “In Rochester right now, you can. ... That’s a problem.”

As some board members pointed out, this is not the district’s first notification that its special education operation is not working. It was under a consent decree for 20 years, and was threatened last year with another lawsuit.

“When you say you’ve been down this road before — I’m not sure you’ve been looking at the right stuff,” Elliott said.

Many of the recommendations in Elliott’s report, and the action steps in Simpson’s presentation, align closely with the vision of Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams, in terms of a focus on relationship-building, professional development and awareness of racial and cultural biases.

“There’s a lot of things that can be moved with the right lens,” Elliott said. “There’s no shiny magic bullet for this. It’s roll up your sleeves, get into classrooms and provide meaningful professional development opportunities.”

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