Pre-K growth: Is there space?

Pre-K

Board wants survey of 'facilities capacity'

WATCHDOG: A CLOSER LOOK

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A decade into its monumental school modernization program, the Rochester City School District is concerned it lacks the building space for some of its key academic programs.

More than \$1 billion has already been spent or committed for renovations at schools across the city. Those plans have been buffeted on all sides by political pressure, cost overruns and shifting academic priorities.

Most recently, the school board was

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forced to adjudicate a nasty battle over the fate of the School 1 building near Cobbs Hill Park. It first promised the building to School 15, then proposed allowing School 1 to stay, then reversed course again.

In the meantime, several factors have emerged, some of them outside the district's control, including an influx of refugee students and children needing special education services. The district has also made a priority of full-day prekindergarten for 4- and even 3-year-olds.

The problem, as School Board President Van White put it: "It appeared to us the right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing."

In other words, the expensive building renovations did not necessarily take into account the needs of the students who would study there.

"It became pretty evident that the facilities plan happened in a facilities silo that wasn't connected to the instructional people," White said. "(We need) to make sure those people are all in alignment."

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At its final meeting of 2016, the school board asked the administration for "a current assessment of district-wide facilities capacity ... (and) a review of any recommendations from the superintendent."

In the resolution, it warned of a current lack of space for continued expansion of prekindergarten and for specialized services, including special education and the refugee program. There is also a general space shortage in the southwest and northwest quadrants of the city. The district opened a new early education facility downtown in September. The only way to greatly expand prekindergarten access, though, is by adding it to more elementary school buildings, and not all of them can spare the classroom space. District spokesman Chip Partner said the changing building requirements were largely driven by changing student needs and demographics, including special education and prekindergarten expansion.

"All that has impact on space that needs to get factored into Phase 3 planning, and how we might adjust Phase 2 projects," he said. The board requested that the survey be completed by the end of 2017.

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Rochester schools Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams, shown in August with Edison Tech Principal Walter Larkin Jr., left, and Assistant Principal Jacob Scott, will present her plan for the school district Jan. 12 at district headquarters.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF FILE PHOTO

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