

Special ed mix-up costs City School District millions

Justin Murphy

Staff writer

A mishandled transition in the way students with disabilities get services has sapped the Rochester School District's \$5 million contingency budget for 2014-15 with nearly nine months still to go in its fiscal year.

When Chris Suriano joined the district as special education director last October, one of his first initiatives was to offer a wider array of settings to fit the needs of students with disabilities.

In particular, he hoped to shift hundreds of students from co-taught classrooms (integrated co-taught classes, or ICOTs), where a general education and special education teacher work together full-time, to a "consultant services" model where one special education teacher gives less intensive support to students in several classrooms.

"ICOT was the model of choice because it was the only integrated setting we had to put kids in," he said; the

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consultant services model is less restrictive and also less expensive, although Suriano said cost is not a driving factor.

In 2013-14, only 257 students were in the consultant services model, compared to 2,426 in ICOT. The split in 2014-15 was supposed to change to an even 5050, a difference the district counted on in its 2014-15 budget.

Students' educational paths are prescribed by committees comprising parents and special education teachers and specialists from the district. The problem, Suriano said, is that those district teachers and specialists were not educated about the new consultant services model and therefore didn't assign as many students to it as expected — the proportions are only slightly changed from last year.

As a result, the projected savings from eliminating ICOT teachers did not materialize. The district has as many ICOT special education teachers as last year, but nearly 40 more than it budgeted for.

"(Consultant services) is a model this district isn't really used to recommending," he said. "And you can't effectively utilize staff if you're locked into the ICOT model."

To make matters worse, the district took in 284 new special education students from July 1, when the new budget went into effect, to the beginning of the school year, an unusually large post-budget influx.

All the extra staffing, plus other unforeseen staff increases elsewhere in the district, mean the district has committed about \$8.8 million more than it planned to, Superintendent Bolgen Vargas told the school board last week.

It has recouped some of that money through additional grant funding and belt-tightening elsewhere, but it's still \$4.8 million over budget, and the contingency budget — the amount of money set aside for unforeseen expenses — is only \$5 million.

"I think it was a little optimistic," Malik Evans, a school board member on the finance committee, said of the special education budget. "You want to use that contingency money for things like this, but you don't want it to be that much. We have to be very strict

going forward.”

About 18.5 percent of the district’s 32,434 students in 2012-13 (including those in charter schools and other outside placements) were classified as disabled, compared to 9.9 percent of students in suburban districts in Monroe County, according to state data.

Many students’ disabilities seem to stem from their environment — trauma, lack of prenatal care or other effects of living in poverty — as much as genetics. For instance, of the 6,453 students with disabilities in the district last year, 20 percent had a speech or language impairment, which is sometimes a result of not growing up in a language-rich environment. More than 500 students were classified with an emotional disturbance.

Evans said the district needs to do more to help those students earlier to prevent them from needing more intensive, costly services later.

“We have an oversubscription in special education, especially among black males, and we need to figure out what’s driving that,” he said. “The sad part of this is that it’s an example of how unfair the current system is, in that the city always has to bear the burden of these costs. No other district has to deal with this situation, and you see in the budget how it magnifies the immense challenges we have.”

More than twice as many males as females in the district are classified as disabled. Suriano said that state of affairs is common in school districts across the state.

The committees that determine students’ placement are being educated on the new array of models now, and Suriano said he is confident the district will be able to accomplish a greater shift toward less restrictive settings next school year.

JMURPHY7@DemocratandChronicle.com

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