

TIME TO EDUCATE PROMISE FOR ROCHESTER

UNIQUE

STRUCTURE? RCSD already has some ‘innovation’ underlying principles

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While the structure of the Innovation Schools Network in Indianapolis is unique, the underlying principles are not. In fact, some are already in place, or could be soon, in the Rochester City School District.

Those concepts include:

- Giving more autonomy to highly qualified building principals.
- Modifying the traditional relationship with collective bargaining units.
- Reducing the size of central office and making it more oriented toward providing services to buildings.

Most importantly, school principals are given independence over things like funding distribution, staff selection, curriculum and pedagogy design and how the school day and school year are arranged.

That is not significantly different from the model in place at East High School, where the University of Rochester is in its third year as the Educational Partnership Organization (EPO). It is essentially a separate administration, complete with its own superintendent, still reporting to the Rochester school board.

The partnership was born from a crisis after the state Education Department set a deadline for major change. After the UR plan was approved, the EPO team had great autonomy in choosing its teachers and designing how the school would work. That included adding a sixth grade and splitting the middle school off from the high school.

That independence is tempered by a governance committee, including teachers and staff, that works on everything from curriculum to cellphone policy. There were also teacher representatives, and some students, involved in the teacher hiring decisions.

Some positive indications

There are some strong indications of success at East. The August 2018 graduation rate is predicted to be about 52 percent, up from 33 percent in 2015, and suspensions have plummeted, from 2,500 in 2014-15 to about 300 this year, through April.

Attendance, though, remains a persistent concern. Average daily attendance in grades 9 through 12 was at 83 percent through April, a level at which school-wide success is nearly impossible.

Indianapolis’ reformers said school autonomy is worthless without qualified leaders; East Superintendent Shaun Nelms said the ability to make decisions on allocating resources is wasted without a strong process behind it.

“Whatever a school deems to be a priority, they have the autonomy to adjust their schedule to meet those needs, but it starts with identifying those needs,” he said. “The question I ask myself every day when I get here is: ‘Is what we’re doing here truly matching the needs of our kids?’ ”

Bargaining power

East differs from the Indianapolis model in that the faculty and staff retained their collective bargaining power. Also, the conversion was triggered by a state intervention, not made available as an option to all district or charter schools.

Kodak Park School 41 does not have an outside organization like UR but is going through a similar process now after being ordered into receivership. It is closing and reopening under a name that's yet to be determined; teachers will need to apply and be selected to work there.

More generally, Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams often talks about empowering school principals to become the drivers of change in the district, and of transforming central office into a support entity rather than a strong executive branch.

The district recently saw eight people graduate in the inaugural class of its principal training program, meant to create a better pipeline of principal candidates.

During her first budget season in 2017, Deane-Williams said the spending plan was "squarely designed to reduce the bureaucracy and central services in those areas we feel are better served at the school level."

One major example has been allowing principals to create their own class schedules rather than having them assigned by the district. That helps schools carve out time for professional development and extra services for students who need them.

"We have a structure that allows for personalization, for children and for schools," Deane-Williams said. "I've told (principals) that if someone in central office tells them 'no,' they can come to me and question and challenge it."

Budget autonomy

It is a long shot from Indianapolis, though, where even non-innovation schools are given a dollar amount in the annual budget to distribute as they please, rather than a listing of the specific job titles they'll need.

Corye Franklin, principal at William Penn School 49 in Indianapolis, said he decided unilaterally to break his older elementary students into subject matter classes rather than keeping them with one teacher all day. He also chose to remove some teaching positions and replace them with teacher-coaches.

There is also a mechanism in Rochester for teachers in a building to redesign how their school works. They can use collective bargaining at any time to make changes within the terms of the overarching contract between the union and district.

That is how many schools have extended their school days, for instance, Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski said. They might also enact higher behavioral standards for students.

"The master contract is a one-size-fits-all proposition," he said. "If you have a better idea about what would serve the school community better ... you don't have to beg for waivers. It's automatic after the teachers vote on it."

Nothing can happen, though, without the principal, and likely the district, signing off.

And most building principals have relatively little control over deciding which teachers work for them.

Greater flexibility in that sense is "probably the wave of the future," Urbanski said, as long as it comes with checks and balances.

"If the district wanted more flexibility in staffing, I think teachers would be open to it as long as it doesn't eliminate fairness and due process," he said. "I don't trust unfettered, unabridged discretion to one person to shape the school."

In terms of cooperation between RCSD and local charter schools, examples are few but do exist. The district had a lease agreement with Rochester Prep High School at 690 St. Paul St. until environmental problems there led to an exodus this winter.

The district collaborates with Genesee Community Charter School on a specific professional development project and with Rochester Prep on recruiting teachers of color.

Those points of district-charter collaboration, though, stand out from a relationship that remains mostly sour. And while mechanisms for building-level autonomy exist, they're largely new and unfamiliar or require punitive state action to trigger.

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Students raise their hands in class at the Phalen Leadership Academy at School 93 in Indianapolis. School 93 was a district school that was closed and reopened as an innovation school. MAX SCHULTE, @MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Shaun Nelms, East High's superintendent, greets a student during the first day of school in 2015. Nelms moved into the position as a result of the partnership between the University of Rochester and East High. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE 2015 FILE PHOTO