

\$802M school budget approved

JUSTIN MURPHY

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The Rochester Board of Education on Thursday approved a \$802 million budget for 2015-16 that funds a new era at East High School and changes the way many students with disabilities are educated.

The vote was 5-2. Mary Adams and Willa Powell were opposed.

This year's budget season lacked the drama of past years. There was a net loss of 138 positions, but that will be covered mostly by retirements and existing vacancies. School psychologists and teachers who work with adult students and those outside traditional schools had protested changes to their programs but were satisfied after discussions with Superintendent Bolgen Vargas. The superintendent extolled the additions in the budget: 46 more reading teachers, eight more music teachers, three more schools with expanded learning time and new investments at East, Edison Tech and Wilson Magnet high schools.

"No school district in Monroe County offers children more opportunities for prekindergarten, kindergarten, summer learning or district-sponsored expanded learning," he said in a statement. "This budget will allow us to continue to shift the trajectory of the district and accelerate our progress."

The budget was helped by a boost in state funding — a total increase of \$32.5 million, 6.5 percent more than last year, including \$22 million in foundation aid. Vargas asked for a \$36 million increase in a February trip to Albany, but was left waiting along with every other superintendent in the state as a result of state budget jockeying by Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Perhaps the biggest change in the budget is an overhaul of special education. Currently, many students get extra help in integrated co-teach classrooms, where a general education and a special education teacher work side-by-side. That model is waning in popularity because it lacks flexibility and is overly restrictive. The district is moving instead to a consultant teacher model, where special education teachers work with students with disabilities only in specified classes they need help with. The Rochester Teachers Association balked at that change but to no avail. The district now faces a feat of scheduling to make sure all students with disabilities are paired with consultant teachers at the right times. East High School will get about \$10 million extra for its collaboration with the University of Rochester, which formally begins July 1. That money will help expand the length and quality of students' time in school there, but comes at the expense of other schools in the district. City Council now must give its approval for the budget. That is usually non-controversial.

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