

Cimusz asks state to fund more busing

Busing

Shorter school trips sought

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Interim Rochester City School District Superintendent Linda Cimusz Tuesday asked lawmakers in Albany to provide transportation funding that would let students catch a bus to a school near their house, a change widely seen as a prerequisite for a true neighborhood schools model. Currently, the state reimburses districts for 90 percent of elementary students' transportation costs, but only if they travel more than 1.5 miles to school. To avoid being stuck with the entire bill, the City School District for the most part does not provide buses for students whose journeys are any shorter.

For many families, however, having their children take a school bus is a high priority. It creates a steady schedule and reliable transportation and is seen as safer than sending students on foot through some of the city's roughest neighborhoods.

As a result, many chil-

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Interim Rochester Superintendent Linda Cimusz

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dren attend a school several miles from home, even if they live within a few blocks of a comparable school. Just 17 percent of young children attend the elementary school nearest to their house.

That has at least two negative effects. First, the district spends scads of money on buses that crisscross the city, carrying students past their neighborhood school toward ones farther away.

Second, bringing in students from far away makes it more difficult for schools to serve as an anchor in their own communities. Parents are less likely to volunteer or attend after-school events, and neighbors have less of a connection to the school if they don't know any of the children who go there.

Cimusz told the Legislature the district hopes to use the state funding to provide universal transportation to elementary students in 2016-17, then expand it to secondary students the following year.

"As the percentage of neighborhood students increases in each school, routing patterns become more efficient and we believe that rising transportation costs will be reduced over time," she said, according to a copy of her

prepared remarks. “We would appreciate your support in our effort to make neighborhood schools the rule rather than the exception for most Rochester families.”

There is already one school in Rochester that provides busing to all students. School 17 in the JOSANA neighborhood has been proclaimed a “Beacon School” — a grander vision of a community school that comes with universal busing for neighborhood students.

The district is spending \$192,000 extra this year just to bus a portion of the students living within the 1.5-mile radius. In time, however, it believes that expenditure would be balanced by savings from eliminating longer routes.

The cost to expand that service to all schools would be high — Cimusz did not specify the dollar figure in her request — but the district’s bid for extra funding is well timed. In his 2016-17 budget proposal, Gov. Andrew Cuomo pledged \$100 million to transform struggling schools into “community schools.”

Also Tuesday, Cimusz asked the Legislature for additional money to implement changes at its 10 “struggling” receivership schools; the four deemed “persistently struggling” already have funding attached. Finally, she asked for \$2 million to maintain the district’s school nurse program in the face of rising employee costs. The interim superintendent, still in her first month on the job, was part of a horde of local leaders who annually besiege the capital during budget season. Her predecessor, Bolgen Vargas, made the trip annually and twice managed to achieve significant funding increases in the final state budget.

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