Vargas to state: Boost funding

Seeks $36M more for school projects

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Rochester Superintendent Bolgen Vargas will be in Albany Tuesday with a pre-emptive request for more financial help from the state budget, including $10 million to cover the East High School partnership with the University of Rochester.

In all, Vargas will ask the state Legislature for $36 million more than Rochester received last year, a highly optimistic request.

Of that $36 million, $10.9 million is a 3 percent increase in basic state aid. The district hoped for 3 percent last year, too, and didn't get it.

Another $10.1 million would be for East High; $4.6 million would be for extended school days at four more schools; $2.4 million would be for a reading teacher in every school; and $8 million would be for a variety of other items, including increasing summer school participation.

"That is a big 'ask,' I know," Vargas said in a written statement to be delivered Tuesday to state legislators. "But I would not request these funds if I did not deem them necessary to serve our children."

Vargas made the same trip to the capital last year and came away with an $8 million bump after requesting $13.6 million. And, of course, he's not the only one making his way to Albany with hat in hand.

The task is trickier this year, though, because the state has not yet disclosed how much aid it will allot to each district, or how Gov. Andrew Cuomo's proposed $1.1 billion education spending increase will be divided among districts.

The outgoing budget director said districts first need to signal compliance with Cuomo's reform goals. The final state budget likely won't be available until late March — if it is passed on time — while school districts submit their budgets to voters in May.

Even if Vargas' plea is successful, the district faces a difficult budget season, with a $40.5 million gap to fill.

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