

RCSD budget has funds for Puerto Ricans

But there's no mention of where they'll be taught

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The 2018-19 Rochester City School District budget proposal includes money for dozens of new bilingual teachers and staff to accommodate the influx, still ongoing, of students from flood-affected Puerto Rico.

The proposal does not, however, specify the setting in which those students will be taught, a cause for concern for the district's Spanish-speaking families and their advocates, including The Children's Agenda, which addressed the question in a budget review released Thursday.

The district is still mulling over whether to create the sort of standalone welcome hub for Spanish-speaking students that advocates have been requesting for years.

"Our largest schools have become placement centers for newcomer Latina/o students with no programs to address their unique needs," the parent Bilingual Council wrote to the school board. "The district needs a permanent K-12 Latina/o newcomer program (with) bilingual social workers (and) special education teachers, and counselors to address the deep trauma these students experienced."

The report from The Children's Agenda supported the Bilingual Council request and warned that there are not currently enough elementary seats for all the incoming Puerto Rican students. It concluded: "A robust response is necessary to make sure these students do not fall through the cracks."

The model for a permanent newcomer program would be the Rochester International Academy, a well-regarded program on the Jefferson campus that serves a similar purpose for mostly refugee students when they first arrive here. Students usually stay there for one or two years until their English is sufficient to attend other schools.

RCSD opened a temporary program to that effect this winter, but has not yet said whether it will become permanent.

The alternate course would be to spread bilingual programs more evenly across the city so that students can attend a school near their home rather than all traveling to one specific building.

Nearly 600 students from Puerto Rico have enrolled in RCSD over the last school year, enough to give the district its first enrollment bump in a decade. That stream is expected to continue throughout the 2018-19 school year, at least.

Another school that remains unsettled for 2018-19 is Early College International High School, which emerged from a protracted land squabble last year with its upperclassmen at the downtown Monroe Community College campus and its younger students in cramped space on Genesee Street.

The ultimate goal is for the entire school to relocate to MCC, where its students are expected to take classes. The district and the college, though, are still negotiating lease terms and no decision has been made yet for the coming school year.

The Children's Agenda report also made several other recommendations: to present financial and personnel changes more clearly in the budget document; to increase use of restorative practices; to flesh out the special education continuum of services; and to help children transitioning from prekindergarten to kindergarten so they don't lose the progress they made.

There is one more public hearing on the budget on April 25. The school board is scheduled to vote on May 15, and City Council is scheduled to give final approval June 19.

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In one of the classrooms, the wall is decorated with flags and pictures of Puerto

In one of the classrooms, the wall is decorated with flags and pictures of Puerto Rico. OLIVIA LOPEZ/@OLOPEZ4/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER