

Vargas' plan has 'minimal layoffs'

JUSTIN MURPHY

STAFF WRITER

Rochester School District Superintendent Bolgen Vargas proposes eliminating 148 positions, including nearly 80 teachers and about 50 central office positions, to fill a \$40.5 million gap and add services and support for students.

As in the past two years, Vargas added significant funding — \$25.3 million this year — for his educational priorities while also covering a gap caused by rising salary and benefit costs and the continuing exodus of students to charter schools.

In his budget presentation, Vargas attributed the downsizing to a smaller

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student enrollment and wrote: "With 203 currently vacant positions and an average turnover of about 300 employees, the workforce reductions can be achieved with minimal layoffs or disruption to students, staff, and families."

The 148 positions is a net loss, but the budget proposal also adds 131 new teachers in targeted positions as well as more professional development funding.

Part of the staff reduction comes from an overhaul of the district special education program that Vargas hopes will save \$4.2 million. The Rochester Teachers Association opposes the measure; union president Adam Urbanski said his main concern with Vargas' budget proposal is an overly conservative estimate of how many special education teachers will be needed.

Other significant proposed expenses in the budget include:

Â» About \$10 million to implement the University of Rochester's plan for East High School.

Â» \$4.9 million to lengthen the school day at schools 8, 19 and 41 and to add summer learning and jobs.

Â» About \$4 million to add teachers in music, English as a Second or Other Language and technology.

Â» About \$3 million to add 34 reading teachers, enough for one at each school. The budget also anticipates losing another \$9.7 million to pay for students at charter schools and about \$18.6 million for increases in salaries, health insurance and retirement costs for the district's 5,500 employees.

Besides the staff reductions and the special education change, Vargas' proposal also eliminates seven school administrator positions, uses \$3.8 million from fund balance and counts on about \$3.1 million from the gradual closing of Charlotte High School.

It would also move the district's adult GED program to operate in conjunction with All City High, a program for students who are off-track for graduation, and try to capitalize on bus-routing efficiencies. "This is an unprecedented budget," Vargas said. "We're going to close our gap at the same time we're investing \$25 million in (East High and priority programs)." School districts across the state have been left in limbo after Gov. Andrew Cuomo declined to release projections for aid in the upcoming state budget. Rochester, one of the largest districts in the state, has more uncertainty than most.

Vargas was in Albany in February to ask for a year-to-year boost of \$36 million. The local legislative contingent has endorsed his

request, and he met last week with Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos and Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie.

But in the budget proposal, Vargas hedges his bets, assuming the district will get \$25.9 million. If the entire \$36 million comes through, a plan to hire 100 teenagers for summer programs will be expanded for an additional 400 teenagers.

The school board will debate and amend Vargas' proposal before voting on its approval in May. Public hearings are scheduled for April 9 and April 28 at 6 p.m.

JMURPHY7@DemocratandChronicle.com [Twitter.com/CitizenMurphy](https://twitter.com/CitizenMurphy)



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