

RCSD considers placement changes

Changes

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The Rochester School Board on Saturday got three broad options for changes to its student placement model, along with a historical scolding.

The board's options to mull over during the next several months:

- Keep the current system for assigning schools to children.
- Send more children to their neighborhood school.
- Largely dismantle the concept of neighborhood schools in favor of “magnet schools.”

For about a year and a half, the board and district administration have been signaling its desire for more students to attend their neighborhood schools, especially in the lower grades. The school board out-

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Achaius Williams plays the part of the butterfly during the performance by first-graders of *The Hungry Caterpillar* at School 15.

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lined a possible plan a year ago, and the district rolled the topic into its broader Path Forward plan, released last week.

The district commissioned a demographic study of the city and reviewed its past enrollment practices before issuing three directions for the board to consider. None are highly detailed, and the board intends to have a series of meetings on the topic before making any concrete decisions.

The first concept in the draft document is to update, but essentially maintain, the current placement model: The city is divided into three zones, and students in one zone can apply to attend any school in it, as well as several citywide draw schools. They also get preferential placement at a school within half a mile of their house.

The main benefit of the current plan is that it provides a balance, in theory, to school choice and a true neighborhood school model. That plan has been largely ignored since its adoption in 2001. The majority of students attend school outside their zone, often because they've changed where they live but not where they go to school. The district further believes that both parents and school principals have found ways to game the system. Knowledgeable parents attempt to bypass the district placement office by contacting principals directly, while some principals effectively prevent students with disabilities from enrolling by telling the district they don't have room. The original plan architect, consultant Michael Alves, was at Saturday's board meeting and made clear where he thought things went wrong. "Other districts used your plan and had fantastic results," he said. "At some point (here), the plan became hostage to bureaucracy. In my work, that's the kiss of death."

According to a 2014 implementation review Alves did — distributed to the board this month, but apparently ignored when he submitted it four years ago — the administration stopped producing monitoring reports on placement in 2009.

Two alternate plans

One would move more toward a neighborhood school model, including high schools. East High School has taken a tentative step toward that approach, creating an automatic feeder pattern with nearby School 33.

For instance, the plan appears to suggest that Wilson Magnet High School would be dedicated to southwest Rochester. The difficulty would be in a lack of options for families living in poor neighborhoods. Now, for instance, a child living in the impoverished Plymouth-Exchange neighborhood can apply to attend Francis Parker School 23 in the more affluent Park Avenue neighborhood because both are in the South zone. That likely would not be the case in a stronger neighborhood school model.

The third proposed pathway would eliminate neighborhood schools altogether and give the district significant influence over which schools children attend, with the primary goal of ensuring rough equity in terms of student demographics across buildings. It would be important to develop strong magnet schools across the city.

It has the benefit and drawback of decoupling home and school location — a benefit, because student address changes are not disruptive; a drawback, because it would likely increase already high transportation costs.

The plan has been used successfully in other districts to reduce segregation, including in Raleigh, North Carolina. Unlike Rochester, though, that countywide district has a large proportion of middle-class students to be distributed along with poorer ones. Here, about 90 percent of children qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, making economic desegregation an impossible numbers game.

No matter what path the district follows, it will need to address the unequal way that programs for students with disabilities and those who don't speak English are distributed, both by building and by section of the city.

Students who are homeless, mobile or have special needs present a challenge to any school placement pattern, and according to the district's new demographic projections, they are becoming more numerous.

Liz Hallmark, the board member who has championed neighborhood schools, said the lion's share of the work remains to be done.

“We need to align it with an equity policy, we need to clean up our placement — it’s all related and it’s very complicated,” she said.

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