

Cost per pupil among highest

City spending 3rd in US for big districts

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The Rochester School District spends more money per pupil than nearly any other large school district in the country, according to newly released U.S. census data.

The district spent \$20,333 on each of its 30,145 students in 2013, according to the data. Among the 217 districts in the country with more than 30,000 students, only Newark, New Jersey, and Boston spent more on average.

That's about the same amount as New York City and significantly higher than Buffalo, which spent \$18,773 per student, the fifth-highest rate in the country.

Of course, that high level of spending has not equated to high student achievement. Rochester consistently

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ranks worst among large New York school districts in student test scores and graduation rates.

Reform-minded critics said the data proves the need for new strategies, particularly charter schools.

Jenny Sedlis, executive director of StudentsFirstNY, said in a statement that the data should be a "wake-up call."

"Money alone cannot solve the education crisis in New York state," she said. "We need fundamental reform. All options need to be on the table to improve schools so every child has access to the best teachers and every family has access to great school choices."

The spending gap is largely driven by employee salaries and benefits. Rochester spent \$16,299 per student on salaries and benefits, compared with the median of \$7,251 among other large districts.

Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski and school board President Van White pointed to a different list on which Rochester ranks prominently: the percentage of children living in poverty.

More than half of Rochester children live in a household below the poverty line. Only Detroit has a worse mark.

"I'm not thinking about how to do this so I can look like a CEO and bring my costs in alignment with my competitors," White said. "My (competitors) don't have the issues we have."

For the school district, that means more spending on special education, English as a second language, social workers and psychologists, among other necessities.

"The quickest explanation is that the city shamefully carries the distinction of being one of the poorest cities in the nation," White said. "When you have extreme, entrenched, concentrated poverty, there are expenses that go along with that." Urbanski agreed, at least in part, with Sedlis: "Just more money won't fix it. ... It's about the ravaging effects of concentrated poverty on everything: health

care, juvenile justice, job training, housing, child care." Superintendent Bolgen Vargas pointed to strides the district has made in shifting its spending away from administrative costs.

"For a high-poverty district like Rochester, there's nothing inherently wrong with being at the top of a spending list," he said. "The question is: is the money getting to the kids? ... You cannot show significant results until you begin to shift resources to the classroom."

Overall, New York had the highest expenditure rate of all 50 states with an average of \$19,818. That is largely driven by New York City and by rising benefit costs statewide.

Among other Monroe County districts, Wheatland- Chili was the highest at \$21,469. It is also the smallest district and thus stuck with fixed costs it cannot spread across a large student population.

Most other local districts are between \$15,000 and \$18,000. Victor is by far the lowest at \$11,801.

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF STUDENTSFIRSTNY