

## **RCSD faces \$65 million budget gap**

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#### **It's largest deficit since 2011-12, when it was near \$80M**

#### **Justin Murphy**

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester City School District faces a budget gap of \$65 million, the largest deficit since 2011-12, a result of increasing salary and benefit expenses and debt service.

In a presentation to the school board Saturday, the district projected \$836.6 million in general fund expenditures, but only \$771.6 million in revenues, including \$10 million in fund balance.

RCSD perennially faces a shortfall early in its budget cycle. The situation this year seems somewhat more dire for several reasons:

- The gap projection is coming in February, not November or December.
- The state faces a well-publicized budget crunch of its own and may be less accommodating to requests for additional funding.
- The gap has not been this high since 2011-12, when it was near \$80 million.
- RCSD must face the compounded effects of this year's unsuccessful special education changes, which have thrown the district into disarray and added \$7.3 million in costs.

Already in 2017-18, RCSD has added 213 full-time equivalent employees, including 93 teachers, 73 paraprofessionals and 24 administrators. The majority of them are in special education, including 10 coordinators who were hastily rehired after the adopted budget eliminated their positions.

Teachers will receive a pay increase of 3.6 percent in 2018-19 by the terms of their contract, while costs for other employees will go up by 3 percent.

Also, 800 more students are projected to defect to charter schools, and RCSD will need to pay an additional \$250 for each of them, though that money will be reimbursed next year.

There will be increasing costs associ-

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ated with students arriving from Puerto Rico, many of whom need English language learner services; and the percentage of students with disabilities is projected to rise even further.

To help close the gap, the district is proposing lobbying the state for more aid and continuing to reduce spending at central office.

That could include a hiring and pay freeze for central office workers, as well as a mandatory one-week unpaid furlough, or shutting central office down for two weeks in the summer.

The 2011-12 budget season, when the gap was \$80 million, was tumultuous and ultimately damaging for the district. More than 800 employees got pink slips, though the final net loss was not that high.

It was the last budget year for Superintendent Jean-Claude Brizard, who left that spring to assume control of Chicago Public Schools. He was replaced by Bolgen Vargas, who said that ending the cycle of structural budget gaps was a top priority.

The administration's 2018-19 budget proposal will be unveiled next month.

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