

Schools want to classify fewer

Schools

Rochester district believes ‘special-ed’ label overused

JUSTIN MURPHY

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The Rochester City School District is aiming to reduce its special education classification rate, saying many of those students could receive intervention services in a less onerous way.

One in five Rochester children is classified as special education, a rate that stands out in Monroe County but not among similar districts statewide. Buffalo and New York City have higher classification rates, and Syracuse is equal to Rochester at 20 percent.

In general, it is more expensive to teach children with disabilities, and a child in a restrictive setting — for instance, a self-contained classroom, or an out-of-district placement like BOCES — will lose out on opportunities available to her peers without disabilities.

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Rochester Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams did not name a target rate, but said the district has relied too heavily on special education classification to get students basic support like more reading instruction. “If you have a system that requires students to be classified to get that support, you’ll create the need for unnecessary classification,” she said. “If someone refers (a student) for classification, I want to know: Are you doing that because you need more information on how (the student) learns to read or do math? Or are you just trying to get the student placed (in special education)?” Providing those supports more broadly, without requiring special education classification, would be less money- and energy-intensive. It would also help spread the benefits to other students who aren’t classified but could still use the extra help. Any explicit attempt to reduce special education enrollment, though, can be freighted with practical and political risk. It is hard to know the “true” level of disability

needs among a given student body, but there are certainly some children in Rochester who require services yet don't receive them. The Texas Education Agency faced intense criticism this year after it was revealed that an arbitrary statewide goal for classification rates had deprived thousands of children of the services they were due under law.

Special education rates in Rochester are not just high, but increasing. Initial referrals for special education placement have risen 72 percent since 2013-14, a time of declining district enrollment; placements have more than doubled. The timing coincides with a shift of control over the process in 2013-14, away from central office and toward individual schools. That, in turn, points in large part to a lack of proper training, according to Bryan Hetherington, who with the Empire Justice Center has challenged the district for decades on special education equity.

"(The district) has widely distributed the decision to classify among people who are not adequately trained to make that decision," he said. "Making a good decision is challenging, and you have to be really well trained." The new approach will give the district's central office a larger role in initial special education referrals. At the same time, the 2017-18 budget proposal reassigns 20 special education administrators into school buildings, where their job will be to coach special education teachers rather than solely to supervise them.

The hope is that doing so will shore up classroom practices and help teachers do their jobs better. There is still the question, however, of the work those administrators have been doing for all until now.

Sandy Simpson, the district's interim special education director, said it would be largely disseminated among building administrators.

"We want the building team to feel ownership and willingly take the responsibility to know all the kids in their building," she said. "People love the idea of increasing staff development ... being part of the conversation in how to address the needs of the kids."

Those 20 administrators represent a loss in membership for the Administrators and Supervisors Association of Rochester (ASAR), but union president Tim Cliby said he's willing to give it a chance.

"Honestly, I don't think we're doing right by students in a lot of places. ... We've got to find a way to do a better job for those special-ed kids," he said. "We certainly don't want to give up administrative positions, but at the same time, if we're actually moving support to classrooms that ultimately will be supports for our teachers and families, we have to consider that."

The Empire Justice Center spent more than 20 years in court with RCSD regarding special education access issues, and has threatened to drag the district back there if changes aren't made. The two sides have instituted a data-sharing agreement recently, and Hetherington said he's willing to give Deane-Williams' plan some time.

"They're saying all the right things," he said. "But until we see the data, we're in a trust-but-verify mood."

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Rochester schools Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams, right, said the district has relied too heavily on special education classification to get students basic support.

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