

Special-ed plan draws union ire

Vargas wants more Rochester students who have disabilities in a less restrictive model

JUSTIN MURPHY STAFF WRITER

An important change in the way thousands of Rochester students receive special- education services is taking shape as a battle during the district's 2015-16 budget season.

Superintendent Bolgen Vargas' proposal would impact classrooms in nearly every school in Rochester. Instead of having many classes co-taught by a regular teacher and a special-education teacher to a mix of special and general education students, there would be "consultant teachers" who have no classroom of their own but instead are responsible for providing help to students with disabilities in their general education classes.

The district, and an outside expert, believe it is a more effective, less restrictive way to teach those students and Vargas denies being motivated by the projected savings.

The Rochester Teachers Association is adamantly opposed to the change, saying students would be shortchanged. It denies being motivated by the likely loss of teaching jobs the switch would entail.

See [UNION](#), Page [8A](#)

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MeChele Markajani, a consultant teacher at School 12, works with students Trevyon Rowe and Jasmine Gunther on addition and subtraction with money. A proposal could change how the district handles special education services.

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SUPERINTENDENT BOLGEN VARGAS

Article Continued Below

[See UNION on Page A08](#)

Union

Continued from Page 1A

Though the budget won't be finalized until May, the switch is already happening. Students with disabilities are now having annual hearings to determine their educational needs, and the district is using those hearings to strongly encourage a transition from the old model to the new one.

For the last two years, the district has failed to meet federal standards in educating its students with disabilities. The planned switch is part of its state-approved and state-mandated attempt at a solution.

The district attempted to move toward consultant teaching last year but stumbled out of the gate. Special-education caseworkers who were supposed to be recommending the program in student evaluations weren't informed of the policy change; as a result, the district wasn't able to achieve its projected savings and ended up dipping into the contingency fund for \$4.8 million.

"If we were succeeding, we'd continue what we're doing," Vargas said. "The reality is, our (special-education) graduation rate is the lowest of the big five (districts in New York). ... It would be irresponsible on our part if we didn't look for ways to improve the current system."

How it works now

More than 2,000 Rochester students with disabilities currently attend ICOT (integrated co-teach) classes, which are jointly led by a general education and special education teacher. Some have a specific focus, like adaptations for autistic children or those with language delays.

The ideal composition of an integrated classroom is mostly general education students with relatively few special-education students. According to Chris Suriano, the district's head of special education, that's often not how it works in Rochester.

Instead, up to half the students in many ICOT classrooms have disabilities, leaving those students without enough general education students to pattern their behavior after. A better use of ICOTs, Suriano said, is as a stepping stone to integrate some students now in self-contained, special-education classrooms. There are fewer such students, so the proportions would work better.

"We've got to get this large ICOT population filtered back into a diverse, integrated model through consultant teachers," Suriano said. "That will allow us to further integrate students who are currently in self-contained classrooms."

The model also is overly restrictive in that students often get more special services than they need. For instance, a student who only needs help in math remains in the ICOT for English language arts, science and history.

Having consultant teachers is supposed to solve those problems. Students attend all general education courses and are accompanied by a special-education teacher only as much as their needs dictate. That teacher can provide that individualized service to many students during the day.

Julia White, a special-education expert at the University of Rochester's Warner School of Education, said ICOT is "quite restrictive" and not widely used across the country in the way it is used in Rochester.

"Consultant teaching aligns more with best practices than the ICOT model," she said. "ICOT is essentially a special class inside a quote-unquote regular classroom."

Statistics provided by the district show that students with disabilities post greater math and reading gains in consultant teacher classrooms than in ICOTs.

For some students with intensive consultant teacher support, the two models would look very similar. Other students would receive much less help from a consultant teacher, or from a paraprofessional or teaching assistant.

MeChele Markajani is a special-education teacher at School 12, located for now on the Jefferson campus in northeast Rochester. She's been in the district for 24 years, and this is her first year as a consultant teacher.

"It's interesting — it allows us to be flexible," she said. "If we implement it correctly, it can be good for the kids."

Targeted ICOT classes for speech and language problems and students with autism are not among those being targeted and in fact will be expanded.

The district's plan entails switching most students in ICOTs to the consultant teacher model in kindergarten and grades 6-12. It would then grow out from kindergarten to the rest of elementary school in coming years.

Some objections

The union has several objections to the plan. First, it argues it is improper and illegal for the district to announce a shift to a new policy and then, afterward, determine that each individual student needs the new service rather than the old one.

"When a kid is ICOT, you can't state before the annual review a policy that you'll stop offering ICOT," said Dave Wurz, the union's labor relations specialist and a former special-education teacher. "I have teachers calling me telling me their recommendations (for a student) to continue ICOT are being ignored."

The state Education Department is aware of Rochester's plan, and a spokeswoman said it is permissible for a district to remove ICOT from its continuum as long as students' needs are being met.

The union also said removing the second teacher from some mixed classrooms would impact not only the students with disabilities, but their general education peers as well.

"There's not a regular ed or special-ed teacher who (doesn't) appreciate having an extra set of eyes and hands in a class to help all the students," Wurz said. "There's collateral benefit to it."

Nicole Fraser has been a special-education teacher in ICOT classes for six years, now working at Robert Brown High School of Construction and Design on the Edison campus.

This year, she has also begun working as a consultant teacher, visiting about six students in their classes. She said that model makes it more difficult to give students help at the time they need it.

"In ICOT, students who need something explained again, or explained a different way, have the special education teacher who can help them process it," she said. "In the consultant teacher role I'm only there occasionally ... so the students in those classes don't have that same level of support."

Both sides agree the trick to pulling off the transition to consultant teachers is implementation, particularly scheduling. They need to be properly distributed at schools so students can get help regularly and have test modifications administered.

Wurz and Fraser doubted the district would be up to the logistical task.

"Scheduling is not their best skill," Fraser said. "It seems like every kid I get every school year is in the wrong class. (Students) never get what they need, and that's been a problem ever since I've worked in the district."

White, the UR professor, said the district needs to undertake at least a year of intensive professional development of its special and general education teachers for the implementation to go well.

"A couple of months in the summer is definitely not enough," she said.

A lot at stake

Both the district and the union have significant considerations at stake beside the welfare of students with disabilities.

The district is facing a \$66 million budget challenge in 2015-16, and it so happens the switch to consultant teachers would contribute to a projected \$7.5 million reduction in special-education spending.

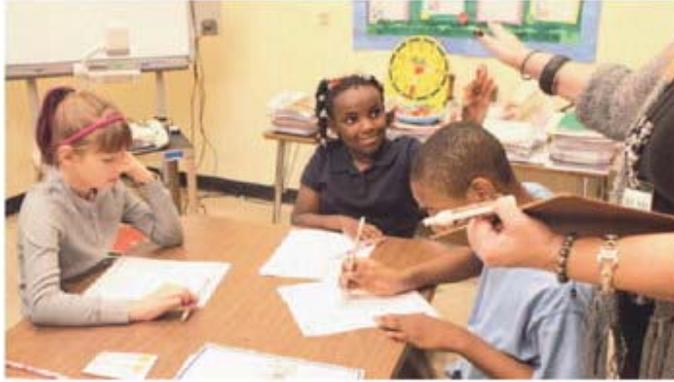
"This is a money grab," Wurz said. "It's reducing services for kids whose parents aren't savvy enough to insist the services stay with their children."

The main savings would be through staff reductions. Fewer teachers are needed in the new model, and some students with comparatively minor needs could be helped by paraprofessionals or teaching assistants rather than special-education teachers. The union says the loss of jobs is not its motivating factor. And despite the \$7.5 million figure in his first budget projection, Vargas said

there won't be massive layoffs. "The whole notion that we'll lose staff because of this change is just not accurate," Vargas said. "We don't foresee an incredibly destructive impact on staffing." The district could not provide specifics on savings or job losses because it remains to be seen how many ICOT students are reclassified with consultant teachers. Students with disabilities are now having their annual reviews where those decisions are being made.

The school board will have an opportunity to weigh in on Vargas' proposal, although by then the strategy will have been largely accomplished.

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MeChele Markajani, a consultant teacher at School 12, gives a high five to Jasmine Gunther for answering a math question correctly with Anselie Gaffney and Trevyon Rowe.

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