

Report: RCSD has a ‘profoundly broken’ special ed system

Report

EDUCATION

JUSTIN MURPHY

@CITIZENMURPHY

Five years after the start of a five-year special education redesign, the Rochester City School District continues to fail its thousands of students with disabilities even as the rate at which they’re classified as disabled accelerates, according to a scathing new report.

The report, commissioned by the district and released in response to a Freedom of Information request by the *Democrat and Chronicle*, reveals how special education teachers and administrators are swamped with paperwork and isolated from the rest of their school and unsupported by central office.

“It’s just a huge, depressing 103-

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page report, said Dan De-Marle, an independent special education consultant. “It fundamentally points out the extremely broken system that, over the years, has become increasingly dysfunctional, and also mirrors the general education system. ... It puts numbers to the gigantic suckiness of the entire thing.”

Procedures meant to identify children’s problems early are misunderstood and underutilized. Students who cause trouble in the classroom are sorted into “other health impairment,” a catch-all category where black boys are disproportionately represented and suspensions are common. The worst consequences, as usual, fall to students most at risk, including English language learners and those placed in the district’s most restrictive

settings. As poorly as special education is handled in the district, more and more students are being classified, evidently the result of a decentralized review process.

“The district continues to accelerate the placement of students into an instructional and support system that has not demonstrated the ability to improve student performance across any important educational outcome indicators,” the consultant, Judy Elliott, wrote. “(Student data) provides a dismal picture of the educational experience these students receive ... (and) RCSD is perfectly aligned for the results it is getting.”

Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams and Chief of Special Education Sandy Simpson, both in their first year in the district, didn’t dispute any of Elliott’s findings. They said its lessons apply to the district in general, not only special education.

“Obviously some of it’s difficult to read,” Deane-Williams said. “There are multiple years of parents and families not feeling they’ve gotten the support they need for their children. ... But this is an opportunity to improve the

system.” Or, as DeMarle put it: “On the bright side, there are still some good elements in the system that you can build on. The bones are good. Not all the growth plates have been crushed.”

“A profoundly broken system”

Special education has been a persistent problem in Rochester for several generations. Twenty years of court supervision were not enough to address some basic underlying issues, which is why the threat of a consent decree has been raised again recently. Under the Bolgen Vargas administration, the district laid out a fiveyear plan meant to increase the continuum of services available to city students. The architect of that plan, Chris Suriano, left last year to become the top special education leader in New York, but the new report portrays much of the recent work as inadequate, unconsidered and poorly implemented.

“(The report) confirms everything we’ve been saying for the last couple of years, and indeed, finds some additional problems we hadn’t raised, which I find amazing,” said Bryan Hetherington of the Empire Justice Center, which has monitored special education in the district for decades. “This is a profoundly broken system.”

A spokeswoman for the New York State Department of Education wrote in an email: “We commend RCSD officials for taking a closer look at its special education services so they can determine areas in need of improvement and develop action plans to address any issues. NYSED will review the report and work with RCSD to develop strategies to best serve students with disabilities.”

School Board President Van White noted the district’s many efforts, across several administrations, at ‘fixing’ special education.

“This has been a longstanding problem in our nation, the state and this district,” he said. “Hopefully this report can give us something to build on. The question will be how we follow up on it.” Elliott is the former Chief Academic Officer for the Los Angeles Unified School District; she also served as a state-appointed overseer of the most troubled schools in Buffalo in 2012. Among her most striking findings:

- » Referrals to special education programs have increased 93 percent in three years, with some classifications — “other health impairment” in particular — being stretched well beyond their intended scope.
- » Black students are most likely to be referred and classified as disabled, and to be suspended. White students are more often classified with autism, while black students are more often categorized as “other health impaired” or emotionally disturbed.
- » The structure designed to address students’ needs before they enter special education is essentially useless; instead, “it could be suggested that RCSD has, de facto, adopted a wait to fail approach to identifying and attempting to remediate at-risk students.”
- » Even after several years of attention to the topic of suspensions, schools continue to put too many students out of class, without allowing them to keep up with their work in the meantime. Programs for those students “appear to warehouse students rather than creating a (viable) educational environment.”
- » Career and technical programs at Edison are “severely lacking.” In one culinary class, for instance, students had no access to any cooking equipment, and instead were practicing setting a table and using a nutcracker.
- » The district spent \$31.7 million in 2015-16 on out-of-district placements, even when nominally appropriate programs were available in schools.
- » Staffing levels in most areas of special education are “generous,” ranking high among urban districts.
- » There is no ‘feeder pattern’ among schools for students with disabilities, meaning they are often shuffled around heedlessly to get relatively basic services. Schools are “clearly” manipulating the individualized education plans (IEPs) of challenging students in order to get them out of their buildings. Perhaps the fundamental concern is a lack of training among admin-istrators and a failure to communicate, both within schools and between schools and central office.

For instance, focus group participants unanimously described schoolbased special education coordinators, or CASEs, as having “a pervasive lack of understanding of special education processes and procedures, (which) is disconcerting since they have the responsibility of implementing (state and federal) regulations.”

Some of Elliott’s recommendations have already been incorporated into Deane-Williams’ plans for 2017-18. They include elevating Sandy Simpson to the level of chief; making a wider continuum of services available at all schools; adding more reading teachers and other support positions; and trying to reduce the classification rate by re-centralizing the process and scrutinizing the “other health impairment” category in particular.

“This is an opportunity to build ... a system that’s integrated (with general education),” Simpson said. “We welcome the chance to look at this, because it opens the door to talk about everything we want to do regarding instruction.”

The report raised specific questions about two subgroups: English language learners and students with a confluence of serious behavioral, social

and academic needs.

As for the former, Elliott noted that while RCSD has a specific intake program for refugee children, students from Puerto Rico, much more numerous, are treated haphazardly. She recommended a more formalized acclimation program for them.

The offerings for students with serious behavioral needs are even more limited. A program called North S.T.A.R., for instance, is supposed to cater to the very most vulnerable students, but Elliott found classrooms with more teachers than students — or no students at all — and a complete lack of meaningful instruction.

“(The report) is very comprehensive and indicates the extent of the work to be done, and the resources that will be needed to bring about the changes,” Hetherington said. “The solution for providing high-quality education for students with disabilities inevitably, deeply, involves general education, because that’s where content is going to be delivered. ... It seems to me that presents the deepest challenge to the superintendent. Can she change that reality in the current system?”

Deane-Williams said she expects to address much of the substance of the report in the districtwide strategic framework due to be released later this month. She also stressed the need for the district to partner with outside community partners to help in the common work of helping students, particularly those with disabilities.

“Our systems and relationships need improvement,” she said. “This gives us the road maps we need to repair and restore the services we provide in the district.”

JMURPHY7@Gannett.com



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Josh Kazdan, 18, left, gets instructions on how to straighten his frame from teacher Dennis Knab, right, as he constructs a dog house in a Work Experience Program at the Edison High School campus in Rochester in 2014.

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RCSD Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams in a meeting at Early College International High School.

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