

R-H may join program

District looks to Urban-Suburban effort

JUSTIN MURPHY

@CITIZENMURPHY

Rush-Henrietta may soon become the newest school district in the Urban- Suburban program after hearing mostly positive feedback from residents at a public hearing Tuesday night. There are 767 city students in suburban schools this year through the program. It has grown greatly since 2014, when Spencerport, Hilton, East Irondequoit and East Rochester joined the original seven participants in the program's 50th anniversary year.

Kendall also joined, but had to pull out this year because the transportation proved too difficult; Webster joined in 2015-16. At that time, Rush-Henrietta said it was not considering joining Urban- Suburban because it already has a very diverse population, with 34 percent non-white students.

Besides adding participating districts, the program has changed its mission recently, focusing particularly on socioeconomic integration in a way that would permit white students, not only students of color, to participate.

While racial equity has long been the program's top priority, new-joining suburban districts have also been sensible to the benefits of adding students at a time of decreasing enrollment.

For many districts, the state funding that comes with each Rochester student is more than the amount they receive for their own students, in some instances creating a new revenue stream. An influx of students can also save programs or classrooms that had fallen to an unsustainably low enrollment. Rush-Henrietta would likely begin accepting seventh-graders at Roth Junior High School, Assistant Superintendent Patrick McCue said, with only a handful of students in 2017-18. After five years, there would be a total of 15 or 20 students.

The district's budget would be unaffected, McCue said. In response to a concern that participating in the program would be "skimming" the best students from the Rochester City School District, McCue said many of the applicant students would actually be attending charter schools instead.

There were 13 speakers at the public hearing; one was opposed to adoption, two were ambivalent and 10 were in favor.

"I don't mean to be nasty about it, but (the busing) is getting out of control," resident Robert Raiman said in opposition. "I just think there's more sense of community if kids go to school where they live."

Millie Sefranek is a Rush-Henrietta parent who recently moved to the district from Rochester. She said having students with different backgrounds is culturally enriching for everyone.

"Even though Rush-Henrietta is a very diverse community, we can do better," she said. "I would love to see Rush-Henrietta continue to grow in that respect."

Clay Harris, another parent, recounted being one of the black students who helped integrate a mostly-white city school when he was a child. "That's what made me who I am today, is that experience of growing up with people who weren't like me," he said. "A lot of the tenor of what's wrong with our society is our

inability to understand one another. ... There's a lot of white kids and black kids who aren't used to being around one another." A final decision is likely to be made at the school board's Nov. 8 meeting. Residents can send in comments via the district's website.

JMURPHY7@Gannett

.com