

District's School 41 ordered into receivership

School

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Kodak Park School 41 in northwest Rochester must be placed under an independent receiver, reconstituted or closed after the New York state Education Department announced last week that it had not made demonstrable progress under previous interventions.

It is the second time a Rochester school has been put into outside receivership, and the terms are more restrictive than was the case with East High School in 2014. Then, the district could choose from among several ways forward. Now, it has only three: an independent receiver or closure, with the possibility of reopening another, different school at the same site. A decision must be made within 60 days.

It will be up to the school board and RCSD administration to jointly offer a plan for state approval by the end of December. Even if the school were to be closed, that would not take effect until the beginning of the 2018-19 school year, at the earliest.

School Board President Van White said the board already has a few ideas about potential receivers or community partners.

“We are thinking about options, and not just recommending an independent receiver,” he said. “I can tell you, there’s some interesting options there, including some with people who have history with our district or who have history in urban education.”

Closing the school would create a challenge for the 510 displaced students. White said he personally would prefer to close and reopen in the same building under a new model — for instance, as an arts primary school to serve as a pipeline to School of the Arts.

“I think there are plenty of good ideas that have been waiting in abeyance,” he said. “The fact is, when our back has been up against the wall, we’ve done pretty well. It has caused us

See **SCHOOL**, Page **5A**



The central office of the Rochester City School District. PROVIDED

District's School 41 ordered into receivership

School

Continued from Page 1A

to be innovative and creative and collaborative.”

Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams raised the possibility of using the receivership situation to work with the neighborhood more generally, including new

It accomplished three of them, related to attendance, chronic absenteeism and extending the school day.

The other eight, though, were based on students’ state English and math test results, and the school failed all of them.

For instance, only 18 percent of students received a 2 or above, on a scale of 1-4, on the state math exam; the benchmark was 32 percent.

planned housing and renewed plans for the Kodak Theater Center. No plans are off the table for now, she said.

“We don’t want to come up with a solution until we decide what we want for those students, that neighborhood, that community and those families,” she said.

She also noted that the school has seen very high teacher turnover, as much as 75 percent in the last few years.

“In effect that school already went through a transformation,” Deane-Williams said.

Seven other city schools could have faced the same fate, but were judged to have made sufficient progress: Schools 3, 8, 9, 17 and 45, as well as Monroe and Northeast high schools.

East High School didn’t score well enough to be counted as progressing but got a special dispensation from state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia. The school had made progress on Regents passage rates and graduating students with disabilities but fell short elsewhere, including attendance and the dropout rate. East High Superintendent Shaun Nelms said Elia accepted the school’s argument for why it should be given more time.

For instance, he said, attendance numbers have been lower on paper than in reality because East has kept nonattending students on the books in hopes of getting them to return rather than counting them as dropouts as soon as possible.

“(The state) has actually invested time in understanding the mechanics of school turnaround,” Nelms said. “When you have such high rates of (problems), it takes more than two or three years to turn it around. We’ve shown them that it’s the trajectory we’re most excited about, and we see all those indicators improving.”

School 41 was one of only two in the state ordered into outside receivership. The other is Build Academy in Buffalo.

The school, on West Ridge Road, has 510 students in grades PK-6, 92 percent of whom are considered economically disadvantaged. It had been listed for two years as “struggling” and had a series of 11 benchmarks it was expected to hit to avoid further intervention.

The school has put its greatest emphasis on restorative practices and trauma-informed care, approaches meant to acknowledge and address the difficulties in students’ lives. Earlier this year, Principal Lisa Whitlow said she was seeing great improvements as a result. The school reported to the state a 42 percent decrease in suspensions and a 79 percent decrease in violent incidents.

“When a kid disrespects you, you could look at it as a discipline issue — but research shows that punishment doesn’t fix behavior,” she said then. “We’re trying to find out what’s behind it, and how we can make them feel safe. ... It doesn’t always work, because you can’t change people’s feelings. But we’re seeing it working here.”

Angela Rivera has three children at the school and lives across the street, making it convenient to volunteer or stop by to see her kids. She was surprised and disappointed to hear about the state’s decision.

“My kids love it there,” she said. “I’ve never had any problems whatsoever. ... I stay in touch with the teachers, and the teachers stay in touch with me.”

The current system of receivership was instituted two years ago by the state Education Department as a way to push along change in persistently struggling schools, nearly all of them serving mostly minority students living in poverty. Rochester initially had 14 schools on the warning list but is now down to 10, including East Upper and Lower schools.

“We will support our students, parents, community partners and our staff at School 41 and appreciate their deep commitment to children and the incredible work they have done together over the past two years,” Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams said in a statement. “We are committed to turning around RCSD schools and confident in our resolve to build strong community schools with high quality curriculum, instruction, social emotional learning supports and vital parent and community engagement.”

JMURPHY7@ Gannett

.com

