

School shuffle frustrates RCSD students, parents

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When Christina Ruffin's younger daughter began attending School 16 on Post Avenue in the 19th Ward, Ruffin was a near-constant presence at the school.

The school was within a few blocks of both her house and her office, making it easy to check in when she wanted to talk with a teacher or when her daughter's asthma flared up.

"I used to go pop in on her during my lunch break," Ruffin said. "I could be there for 30 minutes and still have time for my lunch."

That has changed since School 16 was relocated across town to the Freddie Thomas campus on Scio Street in 2013. Now it takes Ruffin's daughter nearly an hour to get to and from school, and it's more complicated for Ruffin herself to make time to go there if she needs to.

"She'd walk to school in the morning and walk back home, and it was right down the street so I knew it was safe," she said. "Now, it's all the way across town, so sometimes if I have to go pick her up it's a bit of a stressor."

The city of Rochester and Rochester City School District hope the current \$1.3 billion Facilities Modernization Program (FMP) will eventually lead to a major improvement in children's physical environment for learning. In the meantime, however, the necessary shuffling of students has short-term consequences of its own. Relocated neighborhood schools such as School 16 cease to be neighborhood schools, making it more difficult for children and parents to get there. Schools sharing temporary space must coordinate schedules to ensure both have access to facilities and staff. And those temporary facilities aren't always a perfect fit for the students using them.

One of the district's longest-running renovation projects, School 16 isn't scheduled to return from Freddie Thomas to Post Avenue until 2018. It now has kindergarten and grades 7 and 8 on the first floor of the Freddie Thomas building and grades 1 through 6 on the third floor; the second floor is occupied by Montessori Academy School 53.

"One school has one set of needs and the other has another set of needs," School 16 assistant principal Joyce Dunn said. "I don't think there's any building in the district that can meet both those things independently, so you get into compromising. There's a heightened sense of planning that needs to occur."

The two schools share a cafeteria, library and lecture hall. They have a common calendar to schedule the spaces, and administrators and the custodial staff meet regularly to avoid interference.

The building was intended for teenagers, making the current young tenants seem out of place. Step stools help boost the smallest ones up to use the sinks or water fountains.

While school staff faces some challenges in adapting to new space, the larger problem is accommodating children and parents who no longer live nearby.

Joan Cowles has taught sixth grade at School 16 for 27 years. She said attendance in the Quad A after-school

program has fallen from about 140 children to about 30.

“On Post Avenue, I could walk home and meet Grandma on the porch,” she said. “It was positive. It’s hard to do that now.”

The school tried providing buses for families to attend certain after-school activities, but it didn’t prove particularly effective. Attendance at its annual project fair was down by about a third, Dunn said.

“Our parent group was very much based on people living in (the 19th Ward),” Dunn said. “It was very convenient for them, and now it’s not convenient.”

Some positive outcomes

On the other hand, there can be benefits to temporary locations. For example, Freddie Thomas has an indoor pool where School 16 children take swimming lessons.

Children’s School of Rochester School 15 vacated its longtime location behind Monroe High School this year for swing space on Upper Falls Boulevard, which is larger and has better parking.

Unlike School 16, School 15 draws its students from across the city. The sense of dislocation is generally lessened for non-neighborhood schools, including high schools.

Since it moved, School 15 has learned it will not reopen in its old building but rather move to the current School 1 building near Cobbs Hill Park.

“When you move into any temporary space, it’s an adjustment, but we transitioned quite well and the district has been pretty supportive,” principal Jay Piper said. “Just being patient and waiting is the hardest part.”

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SyAnn Hall-Johnson waits at the corner of Post Avenue and Genesee Park Boulevard for her school bus. SyAnn takes the bus from the 19th Ward to School 16, which is sharing space at the Freddie Thomas campus.

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Second-graders at School 16 share a corner of the library at the Freddie Thomas campus. School 16 is sharing space at the former high school while its regular building is being refurbished.

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