

URBAN- SUBURBAN

Program may admit whites

Targets poverty, as well as segregation

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Urban-Suburban leaders soon plan to change the program's mission statement, likely allowing white students to participate and increasing opportunities for suburban-to-urban transfers.

The as-yet-undefined proposal, discussed at a meeting of participating districts Wednesday, would mark the first major overhaul of the program in its 50-year history and comes at a time of high interest among the public and districts deciding whether to join.

The current mission statement was approved by the state Legislature when the program was established in 1964: "To voluntarily reduce racial isolation and the segregation of academic opportunities in elementary and secondary schools in order to enhance and enrich racial and ethnic awareness among students, teachers, and parents."

Jeff Crane, superintendent of the West Irondequoit Central School District and chairman of the program governance committee, said after Wednesday's meeting that two additional elements will likely be added in time for the 2016-17 school year.

One will be a focus on reducing segregation based on socioeconomic status, not just race. The other will be a goal of increasing out-of-district opportunities for suburban students as well as urban students.

"The variables have changed over the last 50 years," Crane said. "We need

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to make sure our mission is up to date as well."

Completely changing the goal of the program would likely require legislative action, but the board believes it can act unilaterally as long as the changes it makes are congenial to the original intent, Crane said.

The specifics of the change are yet to be determined, but Crane said an emphasis on socioeconomic status rather than race could allow white students, who make up about 10 percent of the Rochester student body, to participate in the program.

It currently is open only to minorities, a fact that rankled many in Spencerport during that district's consideration of Urban-Suburban. A white Rochester family unsuccessfully challenged the rule in federal court in 1998.

"The conversation is whether to look at other criteria in order to accept kids, like socioeconomics," said Fairport Interim Superintendent Bill Cala. "Obviously if you use socioeconomics as the nexus, then it's theoretically possible you'd have white kids in there."

Increased attention to poverty levels also could blunt the criticism that the program cherry-picks only the brightest and most motivated urban students, making a difficult situation in the city worse. In theory, participating districts would agree to bear some

responsibility for lessening the impact of concentrated poverty in Rochester.

Crane also said the districts are “trying desperately” to create a suburban-to-urban component. Suburban families and districts have expressed interest in several city schools and programs, including School of the Arts, the International Baccalaureate offerings at Wilson Magnet High School, the dual language program at School 12 and the PTECH program at Edison Tech High School, where students get a high school diploma and an associate’s degree in six years.

In particular, Hilton Superintendent David Dimpleby said gaining access to those offerings is a major element of that district’s consideration of Urban-Suburban. The Rochester School District recently got \$3.75 million in state funding for the purpose of reducing socioeconomic segregation, to be accomplished in part by drawing middle-class suburban families into its classrooms.

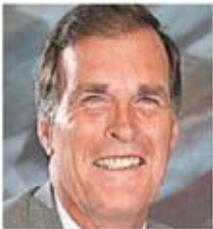
The City School District sits on the Urban-Suburban governance committee and has been actively involved in discussions about changing the mission statement. Adele Bovard, its deputy superintendent for administration and the former superintendent in Webster, said the city schools are committed to “flipping the model.” “We have some unique programs here and we think suburban families will want to come to them,” she said. Some city parents have questioned why the district would give away spaces in its most coveted programs to families that live in other districts. Bovard said the district would be careful not to disadvantage its own students in any suburbanurban venture. “Of course our city kids come first, just as it is in the suburbs,” she said. “But many times there is room, or there is a way to create more space if you’re committed to it.”

Spencerport and East Irondequoit recently voted to join seven other districts for the 2015-16 school year. Combined, they will educate about 650 minority Rochester students who are chosen through a highly competitive selection process that rejects nearly 90 percent of applicants. Hilton and East Rochester are also likely to sign up, and Webster is considering it for 2016-17. The proposed changes have been under consideration for several years, but Crane said the recent debate on the topic helped move them to the forefront.

“We certainly paid close attention to what people were saying in Spencerport,” he said. “It’s fair to say that gave us a sense of urgency.”

The changes will likely be finalized in the next few months, Crane said.

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Jeff Crane, Urban-Suburban program chairman

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