

Vargas departs

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Suggests ways to close \$36.9M school district budget gap

JUSTIN MURPHY

@CITIZENMURPHY

In his last Rochester school board meeting as superintendent, Bolgen Vargas Thursday reported that the district faces a \$36.9 million budget gap for 2016-17 and suggested the board find the money to open a “school of last resort” for students with serious social and emotional needs.

That gap is smaller than it has been in years past but still represents a significant challenge in a budget expected to top \$820 million. In addition, Vargas recommended an extra \$5 million in spending to hire more students for summer jobs and direct more resources to Wilson Magnet High School, Edison Tech and Leadership Academy for Young Men.

The factors driving the budget gap are familiar: another \$11.1 million for charter school tuition and

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Bolgen Vargas is given a plaque before the Rochester City School District budget update during his last meeting as superintendent.

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\$19 million for increasing pay and benefits for more than 5,600 employees.

His suggestion to close the gap hinges on an ambitious 15 percent cut to the district's central office. It also calls for lobbying for greater state aid, closing another (as-yet unidentified) school and deferring some purchasing.

The presentation hinted at staff reductions, which Vargas has long said are necessary as enrollment declines.

The idea of alternate schools for students who have serious emotional or mental health problems, or who have struggled persistently elsewhere, has increasingly been a topic of discussion at district headquarters. Those students are currently scattered across a variety of programs that, Vargas said, mostly do not meet their needs. One of his recommendations was for an "853 school," meaning a privately run therapeutic day program for students with serious mental health needs. He also called for a restructuring of All City High, LyncX Academy and other niche programs; All City High has already spent much of its three-year existence jolting between differing visions of its mission.

Normally, Vargas' December financial update is a preview of the budget he unveils later in the winter. In this case, however, his work will be carried on by incoming interim Superintendent Daniel Lowengard, who will take over Jan. 1.

Before the meeting began, the school board members whom he threatened to sue seven months ago presented him with a plaque for his service and played a tribute video.

"Dr. Vargas helped us rebuild our district," Board President Van White said. "He renewed our district's interest in reading and extended day. ... And he restored the community's confidence in our budget process."

Vargas, who will serve out the last six months of his contract as an adviser to Lowengard, encouraged the board to continue its priorities of literacy, attendance and the arts. "An organization is not about a person; it's about the values of the organization," Vargas said. "What we leave behind is a hope this organization continues to treat every child like one of our own."

JMURPHY7@ [Gannett.com](mailto:JMURPHY7@Gannett.com)