

Draft RCSD budget would cut 236 positions, trim programs

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The Rochester City School District would balance its budget by cutting 236 positions and closing or scaling back several programs serving vulnerable students, according to a first draft that Superintendent Terry Dade reluctantly presented Thursday night.

Dade had asked to delay unveiling his proposal until April 7, after the state budget is finalized and, perhaps, when there is more certainty around when school might reopen.

The school board, though, directed him to present what he already has prepared, arguing it needed as much time as possible to review the document. He did so Thursday night, while noting at the outset: 'At the end of the day, the board of education owns the budget.'

'I truly wish I could be in the fun position of adding to (programs) and not be in the hole and have to cut positions,' he continued. 'But we're all going to have to get through this together.'

Among the cuts the administration is proposing to close its estimated \$61.8 million budget deficit:

■ Deep cuts in special education, including \$7 million worth of staff reductions.

\$948 million. That is largely the result of scheduled employee raises, associated benefits costs and another \$11.5 million in charter school payments.

The district projected an increase of \$4.5 million from Gov. Andrew Cuomo's original state budget proposal. That would normally be a fairly safe bet, but the state is in its own crisis this year, with tax revenues plummeting due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Significantly, the RCSD assumes that the state Legislature will sign off on a \$35 million advance in state aid to close a hole in the current year budget. Failure to obtain that money would set off an even more severe round of mid-year cuts.

Of the 236 reductions, about 192 would be teachers. Dade noted that attrition usually accounts for more people than that, so that there hopefully will not be another wave of layoffs.

According to data provided by the Rochester Teachers Association earlier this month, 77 teachers have already submitted their resignations this year compared to 30 at the same time last year.

Special education

The special education cuts are notable because the school board signaled earlier this month that maintaining special education capacity is one of its top priorities. The district has a set of legally enforceable benchmarks it must meet or

concluded in 2018: 'Not enough trained and (where required) certified staff are available to deliver the programs and services on the (individualized education plans) of all students. This results in students illegally awaiting placements, and failing to receive services on IEPs.'

Board member Natalie Sheppard was one of several board members to raise the same point Thursday: 'When we didn't have all that staff, our kids weren't getting the services they needed,' she said.

Melanie Funchess, the former board member who led the community committee on special education, said Dade was being disingenuous by not recognizing the disproportional growth of the special education population while the district's overall enrollment is shrinking.

'This flies directly in the face of the work of the community and the consent decree,' she said. 'These cuts make it impossible for (the consent decree) to be met. And what will happen as a result? The district will get sued. And the ones who will get hurt will be children.'

The budget proposal also demotes the chief of special education out of the superintendent's cabinet and eliminates two of the five school chiefs to whom principals report, part of a high-level restructuring.

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■ Closing the Bilingual Language and Literacy Academy, serving students arriving from Puerto Rico, as well as the Young Mothers and Interim Health Academy.

■ Removing grades K-5 from Rochester International Academy, which serves newly arriving refugees.

■ Cutting \$4.8 million in administrators and central office employees.

■ Cutting \$2.6 million in social workers and school counselors.

Despite the cuts, the budget would still grow incrementally from the amended 2019-20 total, from \$934 million to

else return to federal court with the Empire Justice Center.

Dade provided data showing that special education staffing has risen at more than 15 times the rate of the special education enrollment. Besides \$7 million in staffing cuts, he budgeted for \$3.5 million in savings through bringing students back from BOCES to receive services in the district — a perennial goal that the district thus far has not been able to accomplish.

“This is not me saying our students with disabilities do not need additional supports,' he said. 'I’m just asking to see what efficiencies we can make (and still) continue to meet mandates.”

Special education observers have said that insufficient staffing was one of the main reasons why the department has struggled so mightily. A committee studying the issue for the school board

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