Hard math of RCSD's budget: Students will suffer

Special ed among areas taking the biggest hits

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The Rochester school board Thursday night grappled in unusually blunt fashion with the central fact of its 2020-21 budget crisis: Students won't get what they need.

Over and over during a four-hour budget deliberation session, board members asked Superintendent Terry Dade whether he really thought services could be sustained, or even improved upon, despite deep cuts to funding in nearly every corner of the district.

They asked about the deeply vulnerable students at Interim Health Academy being moved to All City High, which itself is facing an 11% budget decrease. They asked about reductions in teachers of English as a new language when the proportion of students need-

ing such teachers in the district's enrollment is rising. They asked about 27% of social workers being eliminated from a district full of traumatized children.

"This is not sound educational practice; people just need to hear that," board President Van White said. "You're making decisions — I'm not saying you're a bad superintendent — but you're making decisions that are not in the best educational interests of our children."

The answer, White said, is additional state or federal funding. But that is not forthcoming for 2020-21, and in fact midyear cuts to state aid due to the coronavirus pandemic are a distinct possibility.

Dade responded with a combination of confidence and pragmatism. Asked about the decision to cut 32 social workers, he answered: "That's what we had to do in order to provide staffing across the district. … There is a need, when we have brighter days, (to) provide additional supports according to individual school needs."

The strongest skepticism came in discussions regarding special education, which would face the steepest reductions of any district

Young Men. Other board members, including Beatriz Lebron and Amy Maloy, asked whether East High School shouldn't face greater reductions in order to spare damage elsewhere.

Pressed repeatedly on whether the district could deliver on its promise to do more with less, Dade referenced his own days as a classroom teacher. He was successful with 30 students in his room, he said, even if he would have preferred to have only 20.

"I want more because our kids deserve more," he said. "The fact I know they can do more with less doesn't mean I want them to have to do that every day."

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Rochester City School Superintendent Terry Dade, with Board President Van Henri White and Board Vice President Cynthia Elliott. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

department. Also, the executive director of special education would be demoted from Dade's cabinet.

The committee that helped create the district's special education plan has said flatly that Dade's cuts will cause significant harm, and several board members Thursday expressed the same concern.

Dade, though, said he is "abundantly confident" students will get the services to which they are entitled. Instead, he said, it is a matter of "expectations" for staff.

"We did not put forth a proposal with reductions at the classroom level for special education where students would not receive their mandated services," he said.

Board members also expressed particular concern over Edison Career and Technology High School, the largest in the district.

Just last month, RCSD and city of Rochester officials unveiled renovations and new equipment at the school and pledged their continued support. Now it faces a $2 million cut from its $18 million 2019-20 budget line.

"It's just not going to work," White said. "The math might sound good from an accountant's perspective, but from an educator's perspective, it hasn't worked and it won't work. ... What we're doing at Edison is simply not sustainable."

Instead, he suggested the district consider sending more students to the under-enrolled Leadership Academy for