

Budget ax aims at RCSD refugee academy

Rochester institution slated for deep cuts

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester International Academy has always prided itself as a place with a sense of community — too permanent of a community, it may turn out.

The Rochester City School District program for incoming refugees at all grade levels is slated to be cut deeply in the proposed 2020-21 budget. Grades K-6 would be cut and the overall enrollment would decline from 319 to 144, for an anticipated savings of \$3.1 million.

The cuts — as well as the need for additional, future cuts — are apparently the result of a dictate from the state Education Department.

RIA is only supposed to keep students until they can speak English well enough to transfer to a regular school. Instead, the state found, many students have stayed on for much longer.

In 2018-19, for example, more than half of the 368 students in the program had been there for three years or more.

Those long stays raise 'significant concerns, both for those who remain at RIA too long (and hence are denied equal opportunity to attend other District schools), as well as for newcomers who might benefit from RIA's transitional program but cannot get a seat (because existing students are not transferring out),' Elisa Alvarez, the state Associate Commissioner for Bilingual Education and World Languages, wrote to the district Tuesday.

In an emailed response to a request for comment Friday, a department spokesman said the state had 'approved' the transition to a 7-12 school. But School Board President Van White said after a Friday afternoon conference on the topic that a 'solution is still in the works.'

In an interview Friday, White said he was simply repeating what Dade told him before the meeting began. Several weeks later, Dade did propose shrinking RIA, and his and White's comments proved embarrassing.

'He let people go on and on about how I wasn't being forward,' White said. 'I asked him to provide some clarity, and he never did.'

The district did not respond to a request for comment. It has not made public the correspondence with the state to which Dade and Deputy Superintendent Lynda Quick have repeatedly referred, including a corrective action plan that the state required.

The *Democrat and Chronicle* obtained some of those documents, including the April 28 letter, this week, and has requested the rest through a Freedom of Information request.

In an email this week to the school board, Andrecolich Montesano Diaz said she had been kept in the dark regarding the state's concerns. She pointed out that the state had criticized the slowness of students transitioning out of RIA, but said nothing about the program itself.

'I truly believe that the current administration does not believe in the RIA model and have now garnered the support of the state to accomplish their desire to dismantle RIA,' she wrote.

Whatever the administration's intention, it is now up to the school board to decide how to act. If RIA were to escape untouched, the district would need to find \$3.1 million in savings somewhere else.

Contact staff writer Justin Murphy at jmurphy7@gannett.com. This coverage is only possible with support from our readers. Sign up today for a digital subscription.

'There are children in that building who need the support of people there, and we're concerned about just cutting them off,' he said.

The most recent budget proposal cuts RIA even more deeply than the original one did, decreasing its enrollment even further. Its fate is one of the last pieces of the budget to be resolved before the adoption vote May 7.

Changing message

The academy, which opened in 2011 at the Jefferson campus near Edgerton Park, has been recognized locally and nationally for its success in acclimating newly arriving refugees.

Its staff were taken off guard in February, then, when a district spokesman said the program might need to be closed due to the budget deficit. When dozens of staff and students came to the next board meeting to protest, Dade and school board president Van White denied the comment and said they had no need to worry.

'If you think you are going to convince us to not close down RIA, you are wasting your time, because you are speaking to the choir,' White said. 'There is no intention to do that. Not tonight or in the future.'



School principal Mary Andrecolich Montesano Diaz jokes with Yasin Hassan, 6, of Rochester in 2017. CARLOS ORTIZ/
ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO