

5 schools close doors without usual goodbyes

Budget woes force RCSD to shutter several sites

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At the end of every school year, Ramona Colon plans a field day for the students and staff at Henry Lomb School 20 off North Clinton Avenue. She rents a popcorn machine and a cotton candy maker, hires a DJ and sets up a dunk tank for the principal. At the end of the day, teachers wave at the children departing on school buses for the last time.

Colon has been a parent there for 20 years, with her youngest daughter now in fifth grade at the school. She's been there longer than almost all of the staff.

There will be no dunk tank or cotton candy this year. There won't be goodbyes, either — even though this time, the farewell is a permanent one.

School 20 is one of five schools and several programs that will close at the end of the year, a consequence of declin-



Adam Colon, 23, hands out appreciation gift bags to teachers, including Maria Elliotte, Friday at School 20 in Rochester. The gift bags were made by Adam's mother, Ramona Colon, the PTO president for the school. All three of Ramona's children went to School 20. PHOTOS BY SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



PTO President Ramona Colon, center, receives an appreciation gift from School 20 Principal D'Onnarae Johnson on Friday.

ing enrollment and extreme budget pressure in the Rochester City School District.

School closures are difficult in the best of circumstances. Students and parents must leave the building they know for an uncertain setting in the fall, and teachers face a new assignment as well.

This year, the coronavirus pandemic has made the closures even harder. Students last saw their teachers in mid-March and won't see them again except via video feed.

Relationships built over years will be ended without a proper send-off. No parties, no hugs.

"It makes me very sad," Colon said. "I love that school. ... They really didn't get a chance to say goodbye."

Enrollment in RCSD is down 9% over the last five years, part of a decades-long decline. Closing school buildings is an inevitable result.

The 2020-21 budget season was complicated by the need to fill an \$80 million shortfall, part of it a structural deficit, but most the result of faulty budgeting and financial controls during the Barbara Deane-Williams administration.

The district ultimately closed four schools for good: 20, 43, 44 and 57. It closed School 3 for the time being, while promising to reopen it in several years as a middle school. It also closed the Young Mothers and Interim Health Academy, the Bilingual Language and Literacy Academy and the elementary portion of Rochester International Academy.

Wary of information leaking before he announced it, then-Superintendent Terry Dade departed from past practice and did not tell affected staff or families in advance that their schools might be closed. Several parents, teachers and administrators said they heard the news from the media, or Facebook, or while watching the school board meeting.

Barbara Brown, whose grandson Sha'Mier Brown attends School 3, said she learned the school might be closing on the evening news. Only later did she hear it from teachers.

to cry," he said, simply. "I've been trying to distract myself from it so I'm not thinking of it constantly. Because if I do I'll get sad."

Teachers and other school staff, too, face displacement across the district.

"Not to see colleagues and the students and all the support people is really hard," said Adam Martinez, a teacher at School 43 for the past 25 years. "You can't hug anybody, and teachers are basically huggers by nature."

D'Onnarae Johnson attended School 20 as a child; now she's the principal. Shortly before COVID-19 broke out, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, adding the extra burden of chemotherapy to everything else she must deal with.

Her office was full on cleanout day as teachers stopped by with boxes full of posters, books, coloring supplies and stuffed animals, pausing to say goodbye one last time.

There were many tears, and some curse words as well. They waved goodbye, frustrated and ineffectual but not daring to risk a hug.

"It's insane, the whole dynamic," Johnson said. "The kids are missing their teachers, they're worried about their principal, they miss their friends, they may or may not have the technology (to learn at home). ... It's just heart-wrenching to hear the students."

As much as Johnson and other educators regret having to leave their buildings, they said their main concern is for their students: where they'll end up next year, and how they're handling the transition without in-person support.

"The kids' first question is, 'What's going to happen to us?' And it's hard for us to tell them, because we don't really know," said Maggie Kelly, a special education teacher at Interim Health Academy.

"They come to us for everything – for answers and food and comfort and when they need clothes or something washed or a refill on their medication. And now they're coming to us and we don't have anything to say to them."

Sha’Mier, a fourth-grader, has only been at School 3 for one year, but his grandmother said he was fitting in well, making friends and getting along with his teachers.

“All of a sudden, they pulled the rug from under us,” Brown said. Now, she said she’ll likely put him in either a charter or a parochial school.

The news was particularly painful for Adam Schmitt and his classmates at Interim Health Academy. The small program on Hart Street caters to students with significant trauma and mental health concerns who haven’t succeeded in larger settings.

Adam was overwhelmed at Edison Career and Technology High School, the largest school in the district. Of Interim Health he said, “It’s smaller. I know everyone. It’s less stressful. ... I’ve learned how to look at things more positively.”

He found out about the closing through a Zoom call with his teachers and classmates. “I wanted

An RCSD spokesman said last week that placement letters for students from the impacted schools would be in the mail by Friday.

With her annual School 20 field day called off, Ramona Colon instead made up 48 gift bags for teachers and staff at the school. She ordered wooden cutting boards with the school’s logo, an owl, branded on the surface.

On the day teachers were told to come and clear out their classrooms, Colon and her children came with the gifts to say thank you one last time.

“I just wrote them a note: ‘goodbye, thank you for everything,’ ” she said. “I’m just doing that so they can always remember School 20.”

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