

Equity a concern in districts’ plans to reopen schools

Students in RCSD will be on-site less than others

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Students in the Rochester City School District collectively will spend less time in school buildings than any other school district in Monroe County, and nearly anywhere in New York, when classes resume this fall.

Whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing is yet to be seen.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo is supposed to approve or reject districts’ reopening plans by the end of this week. According to the submitted proposals, most students in Monroe County will attend inperson classes twice a week, but significant variation exists among districts and grade levels.

Ten of the 18 school districts in Monroe County opted for two days a week of in-person instruction for all students. Seven others offer more than that, particularly in elementary schools. Those districts are East Irondequoit, East Roch-



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ester, Honeoye Falls-Lima, Pittsford, Webster, West Irondequoit and Wheatland- Chili.

RCSD will send students in PK-4 to school twice a week, while older students will be online-only, with the exception of some students with disabilities.

Questions about equity

“I have some concerns around child care; I know many of our students are taken care of before or after school by grandparents, and a hybrid model makes that difficult,” she said. “But there isn’t a plan that’s going to make everyone happy, and everyone in Monroe County is in the same boat.”

Same considerations everywhere

That discrepancy in in-person instruction, driven in large part by transportation and other logistics, has led to concern that city children will be further shortchanged.

Several disproportionate impacts have already become clear: students in Rochester and cities across the country often have less capacity to continue their learning at home and rely more heavily upon the supports available to them in person.

RCSD has attempted to fill the gap by distributing thousands of computers and wireless internet access devices, among other things. But extending students' absence into the fall will make the situation even more difficult.

"If a district is providing no in-person instruction in the higher grades, it really creates a high threshold for academic non-academic and consistent interaction with teachers and peers that the school has to provide through a remote platform," said Ian Rosenblum, executive director of Education Trust New York. "Because those are essential – you can't have a school year without that kind of robust support for students."

Eamonn Scanlon, education policy analyst at The Children's Agenda, said some of those issues could be better addressed by greater coordination at the regional and state level.

"The wide differences in reopening plans across Monroe County raises questions about how equitably students will have access to quality instruction and other essential resources," he said. "Placing the burden on individual school districts to manage this crisis without the proper guidance and resources will likely deepen inequities for our most vulnerable students."

While RCSD's plan is unique in Monroe County, it is in line with urban districts across the country. Most of the largest school systems in the United States will start entirely online, a concession to their increased logistical difficulties.

New York City is one of the exceptions to that pattern. Buffalo would have all students in school every other day but would likely delay the start of the school year several weeks.

The worst case scenario, not at all farfetched, is that reopening goes poorly, with the coronavirus spreading among students and staff. In that case Rochester would look wise for not having exposed its students and employees unnecessarily.

Parents in other districts where schools are opening more widely said they were less than entirely comfortable sending their children into buildings.

Roberto and Bryanne Renfrew-Marquez said they'll keep their second grader at home rather than send him to East Rochester four days a week.

"I just don't think it's humanly possible for (in-person education) to work," Roberto said. "Kids are kids; there's no way to keep them out of each other's faces."

East Irondequoit has one of the most ambitious reopening plans, with students collectively spending about threequarters as much time in school buildings as they normally would.

Superintendent Mary Grow said the district has converted swing spaces to classrooms and taken out furniture and bookshelves to use every possible square foot for distancing.

Still, she said, nearly one in five children will be starting the year with fully remote instruction.

School leaders said they'd be more at ease with a more consistent message from Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

"We thought the spring was bad in terms of all the changes in guidance, and that's still going on," Grow said. "That's very frustrating as we try to get ready to open and answer questions for our parents."

Gerald Coleman said he has the same health concerns as everyone else for his three children, who are students at Rochester Prep. Yet he said he's comfortable having them attend class in-person at least a few days a week, despite the child care complications it causes.

"It's going to be tough but we'll have to figure it out," he said. "I don't think the virus is going anywhere, and we're doing what we have to do. But I don't want my kids to be afraid of living."

Syracuse, like Rochester, proposes having high school students learn online only in the fall.

Rosenblum praised Rochester’s model for its attention to social-emotional needs and ensuring substantive daily interactions between students and teachers, among other things.

An RCSD survey showed broad discomfort among staff, parents and students about returning to school in person. Nearly six out of 10 parents said they’re not comfortable with in-person education and another 21% were unsure.

The Rochester Teachers Association, in line with state and national teachers groups, is pushing for a delay in reopening. President Adam Urbanski called the district plan “aspirational, vague, unworkable, unrealistic and problematic in many ways.”

A survey of union members showed much greater ambivalence. For example, a third of respondents said they weren’t sure whether schools should reopen, and those who did have an opinion were nearly evenly divided between yes and no.

Part of their reluctance was due to a lack of confidence in the district. About four out of five teachers said they doubt cleaning and disinfection protocols will be followed faithfully.

Amy Maloy is a parent and school board member in Rochester as well as a teacher in Brighton. She said she’ll keep her own children at home in the fall and is reluctant to see schools reopen, though she added that she supports Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small.

Bryanne Renfrew-Marquez, on the other hand, had what in normal times would be a simple enough standard.

“I just want to stop seeing deaths in general,” she said. “Maybe then I’ll be more comfortable.”

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Teachers, students and families demonstrate Monday in New York City. Organizers said Gov. Andrew Cuomo, New York City Mayor Bill DeBlasio, New York City Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza and the Department of Education must stop in-person reopening of schools until it is safe for all. BEBETO MATTHEWS/AP