

Back-to-school season is unlike any seen before

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

There’s never been a first week of school like this before.

The masks. The distancing. The incessant temperature checks and hand-washing and protocolabiding that have become nearly second nature in 2020, all now transplanted into classrooms across the Rochester region and the country.

Even this approximation of education is under threat from a withholding of education funding from

the state government. The impact of that withholding is being felt unevenly across school districts, with the Rochester City School District taking the hardest hit.

Another significant disparity has to do with how much time children are spending in physical classrooms as opposed to learning at home. On that front, a parent coalition has filed a lawsuit seeking to force a full return to in-person learning.

At the same time, many local children and teenagers have spent the summer taking part in demonstrations over racial injustice. Those national efforts now have been concentrated locally after the news of the death of Daniel Prude in March at the hands of Rochester police.

Struggling with aid cut

New York state is withholding 20% of all education funding to public school districts, the result of a \$14.5 billion state budget shortfall and Congress’ inaction on a stimulus package that could include aid for state and local governments.

Without that federal money, Gov. Andrew Cuomo has said, the state is unable to provide full funding. Advocates on the left have pushed for a tax increase on the wealthiest New Yorkers, to no avail.

School districts’ responses to the withholding have varied based on their cash savings as well as their reliance on state aid in their overall budget. RCSD, with the least cash on hand and the greatest reliance, has said it will cut 20% across the board, though details have not been announced.

The New York State United Teachers union has said it will file a lawsuit to stop further withholding.

“Listen, our kids in Rochester, ... they’re riled up,” RCSD Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small said earlier this summer “Our children are very involved in these rallies and protests. They’re lying in the streets with the adults to talk about police brutality. So we can’t just say, ‘Oh, I don’t see color, I just see a person.’ We have to be cognizant of the fact we do have institutional racism in our school district and our community and we have to start paying attention to that.”

Contact staff writer Justin Murphy at 585-258-9886 or jmurphy7@gannett.com.

Every student in the both Irondequoit school districts will have their temperatures checked automatically when they arrive at school each day. PHOTOS BY JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Students at Durand Eastman Intermediate School in East Irondequoit have assigned seats on the bus that will be theirs for the

“No school district or student is immune to the adverse impacts of a 20 percent cut to state education aid,” NYSUT President Andy Pallotta said in a statement. “But what makes this all the more egregious is the disproportionate impact that cuts have on our neediest schoolchildren.”

In response, state budget spokesman Freeman Klopott called the potential lawsuit “frivolous” and said that aid was being “temporarily withheld,” not reduced.

“We will work with our partners in government to address any remaining gaps in federal assistance and, in the absence of federal funding, any future aid withholdings will take school district need into consideration,” Klopott wrote in an email.

More in-person learning wanted

Teachers unions across New York have opposed the reopening of schools this fall, and polling shows many parents are torn on whether to keep their children at home or send them to school.

Others have their minds made up. A group of eastside parents filed a wide-ranging lawsuit last week against Cuomo and state Health Commissioner Howard Zucker, alleging that various coronavirus-related restrictions, including those on school reopenings, violate New Yorkers’ rights of assembly, speech and equal treatment under the law.

Their lawsuit asks a state Supreme Court justice to strike down most existing state restrictions on gatherings.

“Rational minds would conclude that the death rate from Covid-19 has been greatly exaggerated,” the plaintiffs, including radio commentator Shannon Joy, wrote in the complaint. “In the meantime, while the masses obeyed the governing leaders’ directive to ‘maintain a distance of 6 feet apart or wear a mask’ in order to prevent the spread of Covid-19, many of (us) saw through the entire sham and simply refused to be muzzled by the government — time has borne out that (we) got it right again.”

Summer of protest

Local schools pledged earlier this summer to redouble their efforts in reducing racial disparities both inside their walls and without.

school year.

Kindergarten students at Colebrook Elementary School gets their hands sanitized before snack time.

Those efforts will now be even further intensified, school leaders said, in light of the death of Daniel Prude.

“On one hand, I am excited and eager to welcome our staff in person and students back remotely this week,” Greece Superintendent Kathleen Graupman wrote to parents. “On the other hand, I feel defeat, enormous sadness, and distress about the death of Daniel Prude and what is happening in Rochester. Rochester is our HOME, and the proximity of this event matters.”

The nightly protests in downtown Rochester have drawn hundreds of school-age children, some with their parents and some on their own.