

RCSD plans food, security job layoffs

Justin Murphy

spokeswoman Marisol Ramos-Lopez

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester City School District will ask the school board to approve laying off more than 200 food service workers and school security officers who have been idled with school buildings closed, even as thousands of students are unaccounted for at mealtime.

The district is currently providing about 7,000 meals a day for distribution at city R-Centers and other sites throughout the city, a precipitous decrease from about 30,000 a day in non-pandemic school year, district

said. And with students learning at home there is no need to keep security officers in buildings.

The employees are members of BENTE, the union for non-educators in the district. BENTE President Dan Di-Clemente said he learned of the proposed layoffs Wednesday morning.

They include 171 of RCSD’s 255 food service workers and 49 of its 86 school security officers, along with one other person, DiClemente said. Ramos-Lopez said it would be 164 food services workers, not 171.

The employees are being laid off, not furloughed, meaning they will lose their health insurance. DiClemente said BENTE did not assent to furloughs because doing so would make it “complicit in destroying the lives of 221 lowpaid workers.”

The proposal would also eliminate 171 vacancies, reducing the union’s maximum head count by more than a quarter, DiClemente said.

If the board approves the measure next week, it would mark the second mass layoff in two months. More than 100 paraprofessionals were laid

BENTE had put forward a proposal to redeploy some of its members in nontraditional ways while schools are shut, including delivering hot meals to children’s home and having school security officers do home visits and deliver any needed supplies.

They also asked that elementary schools be kept open as remote learning and meal distribution sites. The district did not adopt any of those ideas.

“You can’t put cold breakfasts and lunches at 20 different sites and expect the kids to walk to the centers to pick it up,” DiClemente said.

The main problem with a districtrun delivery model is that the transportation costs would not be reimbursable. RTS donated its services over the summer for the program it ran with Foodlink, which reached about 1,000 children a day.

As demand increases this fall or when schools eventually reopen, RCSD will seek to rehire many of those who were laid off, Ramos-Lopez said. But DiClemente warned that many of his union members were “sick of it” and wouldn’t return to the district.

off last month.

Like the paraprofessionals, the food service workers and school security officers in question are low-paid and mostly non-white, compared to teachers and administrators who thus far have escaped large reductions.

Where are children eating?

The decline in school meals served leads to the question of where, or whether, those children are eating instead.

“It’s a really good question and one that as a community we’re very concerned about,” said Dina Faticone, director of community health and engagement at Common Ground Health. “If they’re eating those meals at home that’s presenting a bigger burden for families that are already overburdened right now.”

New York is providing some extra money each month for families who qualify for food benefits. Emergency food pantries also are seeing high demand, Faticone said.

Foodlink CEO Julia Tedesco said her organization is serving about 3,000 meals a day across a variety of models. The delivery system using RTS buses that Foodlink had in place over the summer is now mostly shut down.

“It is very clear that thousands of kids on a daily basis are not getting the nutrition they typically get at school,” she said. “It is an urgent need to right now for us all to come together and figure out how to have ... more access.”

School board to vote

School Board President Van White said he’s waiting for more details on whether the district can reasonably redeploy some BENTE members.

“It’s regrettable, and where we can find legitimate work that falls within the scope of these folks’ duties, we should find a place for them,” White said. “But if there just is no work that can fall within their scope of duties, we can’t make up work.”

Whether or not schools reopen later this year, RCSD is looking to shed any expenses it can. Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small said last month the district would cut its own budget by 20% in response to a similar withholding of state education aid.

It got modest good news on that front Wednesday, when Gov. Andrew Cuomo said the state would make its upcoming state aid payment to districts in full.

The school board is scheduled to vote on the BENTE reductions at its Sept. 24 meeting.

Contact staff writer Justin Murphy at jmurphy7@gannett.com.