

Why can't RCSD reopen?

Superintendent has not given specific details about where the danger lies

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Students in New York City, the largest school district in the country, have been attending school in person since September, along with their peers in hundreds of smaller districts. In October, Syracuse and Yonkers reopened their doors as well.

Why not Rochester?

Early research shows that schoolhouse transmission of COVID-19 has been minimal. The odds would be even better in Rochester, it seems, since the metropolitan area is one of the safest in the nation in terms of the coronavirus.

Yet Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small announced recently that nearly all Rochester City School District students will remain home until February at the soonest. Only about 800 of the most vulnerable students with disabilities will have the choice of returning to school four days a week beginning Jan. 4.

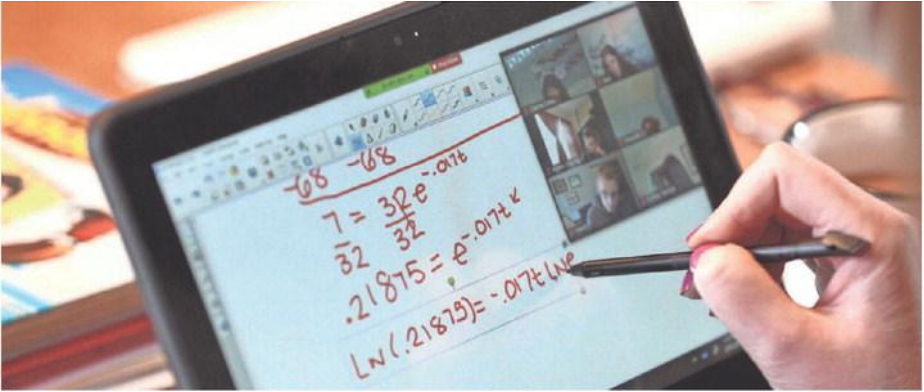
Rochester and Buffalo are the only school districts in New York that remain fully remote.

Myers-Small has not given specific details about where, exactly, the danger lies in reopening schools. She instead has pointed to the confluence of several difficult logistical issues, with transportation and food service chief among them.

“If we look at what’s happening across the state and across the country, when you have a larger school district, there are unique circumstances and the size makes things more difficult,” she said Friday in an interview with Evan Dawson on WXXI.

That has been the case in other districts, leaving a more manageable number of students to accommodate in-person.

“On the operations side we’re prepared,” he said. But, he noted, operations is only one component of the bigger picture Myers-Small must consider.



A teacher works with students in online learning.

JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

“We are now entering the most dangerous period of the pandemic – the next 12 weeks or so are going to be the most difficult ones. (Teachers) don’t want children and themselves to get sick.”

RTA President Adam Urbanski

Mike Schmidt, the district’s chief of operations, said Tuesday that those practical problems are not insuperable, especially if a large number of students were to opt against in-person learning altogether.

Surveys show ambivalence

Survey results released by the district in October show significant ambivalence around reopening. Students were the most sanguine, with 65% saying they want to return to school in-person.

Parents and guardians, meanwhile, were less supportive, with 47% in favor of a partial return to the classroom.

There has been very little public pressure on RCSD to reopen schools. The school board in October held several meetings with the opportunity for public comments, for instance, and heard from only one parent advocating for in-person learning.

The district survey reported 58% of staff in favor of fully in-person or hybrid learning. Separately, the Rochester Teachers Association showed 81% of members in favor of remaining fully remote until late January at least.

“We are now entering the most dangerous period of the pandemic – the next 12 weeks or so are going to be the most difficult ones,” RTA President Adam Urbanski said. “(Teachers) don’t want children and themselves to get sick.”

Teachers in Yonkers, too, doubted whether schools there could reopen safely. But the district moved forward anyway in early October after having spent \$10 million to make its buildings safer.

In Rochester, that is unfeasible. Myers-Small has been careful to frame her decisions as based on health and academics, not finances, but the district is in no position to fund the sorts of infrastructure and equipment upgrades that would make in-person classes safer.

Indeed, the district could not move forward on a plan to equip its students with at-home internet access until a coalition of local funders

they needed to learn online. The RCSD survey showed a majority of students and families disagreeing with the idea that “things are going well.”

Those survey results echo what the Education Trust New York, an advocacy organization, found in a statewide survey.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has supported school reopening because of the array of ways in which students who miss in-person classes are harmed. It also has called for federal funding to help schools do so, something that mostly has not been forthcoming.

Monroe County Medical Director Dr. Michael Mendoza, too, has said he believes schools have demonstrated the capacity to operate safely. When asked about their being closed in a possible next wave of the virus, he said: “I would put them at the very end, frankly, because they’ve proven they can keep the infection rate low.”

A spokeswoman for Mendoza did not respond to a question regarding whether his opinion for RCSD is any different.

Myers-Small has said several times that no decisions have been made for the remainder of the school year; some or all students could return in the spring, at least part-time.

For Tiara Moore, that would be welcome news. She has a son at Virgil Grissom School 7 as well as two daughters in prekindergarten.

“I’ve got all of them on tablets, and it’s a lot to maintain,” she said.

Asked whether she thought they’d go back in school this year, she responded: “I’m praying they do, but I’m not holding my breath.”

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

promised to cover the cost.

Student losses in every scenario

Certainly, no single perfect solution exists for the problem that COVID-19 poses, particularly in urban school districts. But while RCSD has prioritized keeping school buildings closed to prevent transmission, students are suffering in other ways.

Four out of five respondents in the RTA survey said their students were not getting all the support