

# Monitor again warns RCSD is overstaffed

Urges significant reduction in number of teachers

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The Rochester City School District now estimates a current-year budget shortfall of about \$76 million, a figure highly dependent on whether state funding is withheld later in the year.

The news came on the same day that monitor Shelley Jallow released proposed fiscal and academic plans for the district, urging a significant reduction in teachers in city schools and a more disciplined approach to labor relations.

**Budget deficit updated** The key variable for the district’s current- year budget deficit is whether the state withholds regular funding due to its own coronavirus-induced budget crisis. It is reserving the right to do so but, so far, has made all foundation aid payments in full. Only grant funding, representing about \$22 million, has been impacted.

Such a withholding would crater the district’s budget and, additionally, would give the city of Rochester the right to call immediately a loan of about \$86 million it extended to RCSD. That would leave the district unable to meet its payroll.

The \$76 million deficit that RCSD Chief Financial Officer Carleen Pierce mentioned is based on a projected 5% state funding shortfall for 2020 21. A 10% shortfall would mean a deficit nearer to \$102 million, according to projections in Jallow’s draft fiscal report. A return to in-person instruction, too, would affect current-year budget projections.

The district has saved about \$13 million so far this year, Pierce said, with the bulk of it coming in the fields of operations and student support services.

A similarly daunting budget crisis last year led to a massive mid-year teacher layoff. Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small acknowledged some cost-cutting will be necessary this year as well but said it’s too early to guess at the size or target area.

“I need to know whether it will be 0, 5, 17 or 20 percent (state funding withheld),” she said. “It’s hard to make those kind of determinations

“The bottom line is that if they were to reduce the number of teachers by half, that is unworkable and would be absolutely devastating,” he said.

The question is difficult to solve because, in a district where about 1 in 10 students experiences homelessness in a given year and around half are chronically absent, it is difficult to say on paper when a classroom is full.

“I don’t buy that since there are fewer students in the district, therefore there should be a proportionate reduction in the number of teachers,” School Board President Van White said. “The sort of problems we have in the district today are not the same as they had in the ‘70s, ‘80s and ‘90s, and they require more social workers and counselors and teachers in the classroom.”

Eamonn Scanlon, education policy analyst at The Children’s Agenda, said he mostly agrees with Jallow’s recommendations but now wants to see them implemented.

“All the recommendations have been made in some capacity before, and the newer ones are all completely sound,” he said. “It’s good – it’s just a question of follow- through.

until we know the actual reduction of what will be held back, and also have conversations about what reopening looks like moving forward.”

**Monitor’s report**

Jallow is recommending a significant reduction in teachers in city schools and a more disciplined approach to labor relations, according to draft academic and fiscal plans released Tuesday.

Neither recommendation is new, but Jallow said both are critical to reforming the district’s academic and fiscal status.

The school board will hold a hearing on her two reports at 6 p.m. Wednesday.

Some of Jallow’s recommendations are mere suggestions; others are mandatory, unless the school board can convince the state education commissioner otherwise. Among them:

- A return to neighborhood schools for elementary students, part of a series of steps to reduce transportation costs, with a feasibility study to be finished by May 2021
  - New textbooks, replacing some in science and social studies that are nearly 20 years old
  - Developing a single unified “turnaround” strategy for schools under state sanction, including having Myers- Small assume greater power under state receivership law
  - Investing in new financial management software rather than continually building workarounds on the current outdated software
  - Closer attention to Medicaid billing to increase revenues and limit fraud
  - Aggressively saving money until a proper fund balance is restored
- Many of Jallow’s findings borrow from Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino’s report; as Jallow noted, the work he outlined remains largely undone.

“The real challenges for the district are money and stability. Ultimately it’s going to be about the level of state funding and how long Lesli Myers-Small stays around.”

Jallow referred to the likelihood of flat or declining state funding in her finance report, giving multiyear projections with varying levels of state support. None of her charts looked very reassuring.

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**The key variable for the district’s current-year budget deficit is whether the state withholds regular funding due to its own coronavirus-induced budget crisis.**



**In 2017, Paw Eh Ler waits with classmates to leave the library with books at the Rochester International Academy for refugees in Rochester.** MAX SCHULTE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO



Both Aquino and Jallow concluded the district must be more disciplined **Jallow** in its labor relations strategy. Jallow counted 200 agreements RCSD has signed with its unions outside their formal contracts, mostly without oversight from the board and the executive cabinet.

Another familiar refrain is the need to “right-size” the work force. Jallow pointed to language in the Rochester Teachers Association contract allowing for student- teacher ratios of between 25 and 28 students per classroom, depending on the grade level, and said the current prevailing ratios are nearer to half of that.

“I’m not saying you have to go to the max, but you have to do a little bit better on these (ratios),” Jallow told the board last week.

“I think it’s costing you financially but also it has an impact on academics as well.”

RTA President Adam Urbanski said that was “a very common mistake that most people make who aren’t familiar with how things work.” He rejected her estimate of between 9 and 14 students per class currently, saying she hadn’t taken into account specialized classes for students with disabilities.