

## Most RCSD educators don't live in the city

Majority of highest earners pick suburbs; critics say it's a problem

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The last student is dismissed for the day at Dr. Charles T. Lunsford School 19 and the last afternoon meeting concluded, and Principal Moniek Silas-Lee walks out the front door to start her commute home. Left on Reynolds Street, north for two blocks, then right on Hawley. That's the commute. It takes five minutes.

Silas-Lee lives so close to school, in fact, that parents sometimes ask if she'll walk their children home. "I see my students all the time ... and the neighbors are appreciative of the fact I'm here and live where I work," she said. "It's definitely a positive impact."

A positive impact but an uncommon one. In living in the city, Silas-Lee is part of a distinct minority among educators in the Rochester City School District.

More than three quarters of teachers and principals drive home to the suburbs each night. It is a commute with serious consequences for communitybuilding at schools and for the city's tax base.

The *Democrat and Chronicle* combined multiple RCSD directories into one database to create the firstever detailed picture of district employee residency.

Among the findings:

- High-paid employees overwhelmingly live outside the city, including 84% of administrators

and 82% of teachers. Of the 100 top earners in the district, only 12 live in the city.

- Among the suburbanites is Lesli Myers-Small,



**Moniek Silas-Lee, principal at School 19 on Seward Street, walks to school from her nearby Rochester home on March 11.**

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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the first superintendent in RCSD history not to live in the city.

- By contrast, lower-paid employees mostly live in the city, including 62% of paraprofessionals and teacher assistants.

- Employees who live in the city on the whole earn less on average than those who live in the suburbs, even accounting for job category and seniority.

- All together, 76% of RCSD salary payments, or \$232 million, go to the suburbs every year, where the money helps fund schools in communities from which the city's minority residents historically have been excluded.

- A district incentive program meant to attract employees to the city has had little effect.

More Rochester teachers live in the city than do Rochester police officers, who lately have come under much greater scrutiny.

State law bars residency requirements for uniformed employees such as police officers, but the same is not true for school district employees. A residency requirement for district administrators in the 1980s was canceled after it proved difficult to enforce.

“People can live wherever they want, but there is a cost,” said Simeon Banister, vice president of community programs at the Rochester Area Community Foundation, who has long pointed to the residency effect. “The effect of having that money leave the city of Rochester every year only deepens the level of disparity that exists.”

### **Higher paid employees choose suburbs**

While concerns about teacher and administrator residency have often been raised by school board members and community leaders, RCSD initially said it did not have data immediately available. Instead it provided a pair of employee roster documents that the *Democrat and Chronicle* converted into a complete database reflecting employee residency, salary, seniority, job description and bargaining unit, among other things.

The database includes 4,889 people employed by the district in late 2020 and earning a total of \$304.6 million in annual salary, not including benefits.

important,” he said. “She’s got a long history in Rochester and a lot of credibility. But it’s still the case that (her salary) is ending up in the suburbs.”

### **Leaking revenue**

Why shouldn’t people live where they want?

“The most important thing is to attract highly qualified, highly committed people no matter where they reside,” ASAR President Tim Cliby wrote in an email. “(Educators’) commitment for the advocacy of students and families will not change because of their zip code.”

There are two main counterarguments. The first is that teachers who live in the same community as their children will naturally develop closer relationships with them. They might see them at church or at the store, or get to know their parents socially.

“When you’re living in the community you are aware of some of the experiences of the students and the ways in which their experiences shape and inform their understanding of the world,” said Crystal Simmons, assistant professor of social studies, international and multicultural education at SUNY Geneseo’s Ella Cline Shear School of Education. “It can help teachers think about their teaching practices and build connections between what students are learning and their lived experiences.”

Adra McClary, a teacher at School 29, recalled when she was a paraprofessional at School 36 and could walk to work every morning.

“The students would come by and they’d be waiting for me outside and we’d walk together,” she said. “It does give you a sense of community, just being in the neighborhood. The kids would come to me if they needed help with anything.”

McClary even held off-the-clock tutoring sessions in her back yard and ran a student book club. She considered it her way of paying the community back for the help she had received.

“I was one of those kids in the neighborhood; I know what it’s like where you don’t even know how to dream that big,” she said. “I didn’t

Overall, 29% of RCSD employees live in the city.

It is also the case that many suburban school district employees (and superintendents) do not live where they work. But while many Webster teachers live in Penfield, a roughly equivalent number of Penfield teachers live in Webster. The same reciprocity is not reflected with the city of Rochester.

The most striking aspect of the data is that higher paid employees — teachers, administrators and those in central office — are highly likely to live in the suburbs, while paraprofessionals, custodians and food service workers mostly live in the city.

In the Rochester Teachers Association, by far the largest bargaining unit in the district, 18% live in the city. In the Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester it is 16%.

By contrast, 48% of non-educators in the BENTE union live in the city and 62% of members of the Rochester Association of Paraprofessionals.

The correlation with salary is clear. For example, 72% of custodial workers live in the city and earn an average of \$33,000; only 5% of kindergarten teachers live in the city and earn an average of \$71,000.

In a sense the numbers are unsurprising. Housing and other services for low-income people are overwhelmingly concentrated in the city of Rochester, making it an inescapable option for many low-wage RCSD employees. Higher earners, meanwhile, often have the same concerns about their children attending RCSD schools as other parents, despite the fact that they themselves work in those schools.

The effect is particularly striking among the highest echelon of district leaders. Non-city residents as of autumn 2020 include Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small; Chief Academic Officer Kathleen Black; Deputy Superintendents Melody Martinez-Davis and Genelle Morris; East High School Superintendent Shaun Nelms; and Chief Financial Officer Carleen Pierce.

Morris, who came to RCSD from Buffalo Public Schools, will continue living in the Buffalo area and commute every day to Rochester.

want to live and teach in the suburbs because I know I have something to give to the kids in the city.”

The second major concern with employees living outside the city is financial. The \$234 million of RCSD salary that goes into the suburbs each year pays property taxes to sustain higher regarded suburban school districts and generally support more affluent communities from which non-white people in Rochester historically were excluded.

“Economic parity is critical in any community because economy is about momentum and the flow of resources, and the flow of resources in Rochester is very one-directional,” RACF’s Banister said. “Then add in the history of racialized exclusion ... That adds the moral dimension.”

Rochester school board member Bill Clark made the same argument 27 years ago, when he was president of the Urban League in Rochester. In an opinion piece in the *Democrat and Chronicle*, he noted that about 60% of teachers and administrators then lived outside the city.

“The taxpayers of Rochester are tired of paying salaries that are double or triple their own median income to individuals whose commitment to the city ends at the close of the workday,” Clark wrote then.

Recently he said his position has softened, but only slightly.

“One of the things we struggle with as a board is not having enough revenue to give the kind of quality education we need for our scholars,” Clark said.

He added: “I’d like to see those role models be neighbors. I grew up in the South and it was pretty segregated so all the Black professionals lived in the neighborhoods. Having those role models in the neighborhoods – the doctors, teachers, police – it served as a kind of motivational factor for our young folks and improved the quality of life for everyone.”

### **Possible solutions, but only small success elsewhere**

Those who wish to see higher rates of city residency suggest three possible mechanisms. The first is the simplest: a requirement for at least certain classes of newly hired RCSD employees to live in Rochester.

One surprising item in the data: city resident employees earn less on average than their suburban peers, even within the same jobs and seniority levels.

For example, among English teachers in the 50th to 59th percentile in seniority, city residents earn an average of \$62,441, but suburban residents earn an average of \$66,326. RCSD Chief of Human Capital Chris Miller suggested it could be a result of higher-paid individuals moving to the suburbs.

**Suburban superintendent**

Lesli Myers-Small is the first superintendent since the district was founded in 1841 not to live in the city.

Her immediate predecessors had a clause in their contracts that ensured it: “The Board places great value on the Superintendent becoming a member of the Rochester community. The Superintendent agrees to establish and maintain residency ... within the District’s boundaries.”

Myers-Small grew up in Pittsford and previously served as superintendent in Brockport. When negotiating her contract in 2020, the board agreed to remove the clause and let her maintain her home in the town of Parma.

In a statement, Myers-Small said it was important to her to remain in that house because her mother is medically fragile and would have had difficulty with the change.

Her mother lived with her for many years. She no longer does so, but comes to stay with her on occasion.

“I recognize that living in the school district is an important characteristic for the superintendent in some school communities,” Myers-Small said.

“When my mother stays with us, ours is the home that she recognizes, knows, and loves as her own. I shared this information with the board and they were supportive of my ask given the relationship between my mother and me, as well as her medical condition.”

Such a requirement exists for some positions in city government. It does not cover police officers, though — state law prohibits it — and so only about 6% of sworn officers live in Rochester.

RCSD had a residency requirement for administrators in the 1980s, but it was controversial and largely ineffectual. The district repeatedly granted waivers or placed teachers on administration-like “special assignments” to skirt the rule, while a number of administrators pledged to move and then did not.

The rule was repealed in 1986, at which time 45% of administrators lived in the city.

RTA President Adam Urbanski said such a policy today would be “a disaster for our students” and said RCSD instead should improve to make the city a more appealing place for educators and others to live.

“We should celebrate the willingness of anyone to teach in the city if they’re committed and competent teachers,” he said. “This kind of a requirement would

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School Board President Van White said he would prefer that all employees live in the city but doubted how effective a residency requirement could be, and said an exception was warranted in Myers-Small's case.

"She was an extremely rare and exceptional candidate, and under the circumstances involving her mother, we did not feel it was our place to (make her move)," he said.

Banister, too, refrained from criticizing Myers-Small directly, but said the effect of her out-of-town residence still has an impact.

"There is a degree to which the signaling is

**Adra McCleary, a K-3 teacher at School 29, used a program for Rochester school teachers to purchase a home in the city. McCleary has lived in her Ramona Street home for three years.** TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

*"I was one of those kids in the neighborhood; I know what it's like where you don't even know how to dream that big. I didn't want to live and teach in the suburbs because I know I have something to give to the kids in the city."*

*Adra McClary*

*a teacher at School 29*

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