

Most RCSD high schools to be in-person

Nearly 3,000 students don't have a bus yet due to driver shortage

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After a chaotic weekend of planning, the Rochester City School District has managed a partial reversal of its proposal last week to begin students in grades 9-12 in remote learning.

School will start Thursday inperson for all students — but nearly 3,000 students, including those at five full schools, don't have a bus yet. They can either make their own way to school or learn online.

The remote proposal was made because of a shortage of bus drivers, a problem that still exists. But RCSD worked over the long weekend with the Regional Transit Service, which has agreed to reassume transportation for several district high schools after losing the work in its most recent contract.

The school board voted Sunday evening to push the first day of school back to Thursday for all students, and to start in-person everywhere.

At a second meeting Monday night, Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small gave greater detail: 2,600 secondary students and 144 K-8 students lack a bus

route. That includes the entirety of Edison Career and Technology High School, Northeast College High School, Northeast Junior High, Leadership Academy for Young Men and Rochester Early College International High School.

RCSD, RTS and other transportation providers hope to be able to provide buses to those secondary students by Monday, Sept. 13. The RTS board was to meet at noon Tuesday to approve any changes on its end.

As part of the plan, several hundred children who live within 1.5 miles of schools 10, 17 and 22 and had been receiving a bus ride will now need to arrange their own transportation.

The situation remains fluid. Myers-Small said she had a workable plan at the end of Saturday, only to hear of about 20 further driver resignations when she woke up Sunday morning.

The city of Rochester will open four recreation centers Wednesday for parents who had anticipated their children being in school.

Sunday's virtual meeting was a disorderly affair. It quickly became apparent that Myers-Small had neither a firm plan to present nor the comprehensive data, specifically the number of rideless children, that the school board wanted.

After two hours of hurly-burly, the tentative plan for a partial delay with limited simultaneous learning materialized. It depends entirely on an expanded contract with RTS, whose relationship with the district over the last seven years has been badly strained.

Historically, all city students (including those at schools outside RCSD) have taken RTS buses. The district has long felt that RTS's prices were far too high, but it lacked the leverage for a better deal.

When the last contract expired before the 2020-21 school year, RCSD did not renew it. That was at the urging of Monitor Shelley Jallow, among others.

Instead it went out to bid and ultimately divided the work between RTS and a new provider, Ontario Bus.

On Sunday, RCSD Transportation Director Wayne Kittleberger said Ontario has enough drivers to fulfill its routes but two other providers, First Student and Monroe Transportation, do not.

Myers-Small said the district has not been offering any recruitment incentives for drivers. A First Student representative outlined an array of incentives it has been offering. Board member Amy Maloy on Monday encouraged the district to do the same.

RCSD still needs to negotiate the price RTS will request for its last-minute assistance. Notably, RTS already believes the district shorted it about \$1.6 million in unpaid bills for spring 2020 after COVID-19 hit.

RCSD Chief of Operations Mike Schmidt highlighted a possible future hurdle: Across the country, he said, districts have been seeing bus drivers not show up on the first day of school. Each additional wave of resignations puts RCSD in a deeper hole, as there are currently no substitute drivers at all.

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