

RCSD floats ending busing for Urban-Suburban, other suburban schools

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester City School District Tuesday recommended to the school board that it stop busing students to schools out of the district, including through the Urban-Suburban program and to private, parochial and charter schools located outside city limits.

It was part of a raft of recommendations from an administration task force on student placement and transportation. Approximately 3,500 students could be affected; the only exception would be students with disabilities who are attending programs at BOCES or other suburban locations.

The school board reacted coolly to nearly the entire presentation, including the proposed restoration of junior high schools; an end to busing students to after-school babysitters; and a possible cash incentive for the families of students who attend a neighborhood school and maintain good attendance.

“I don’t understand if the folks on this task force understand the families we actually serve,” board member Beatriz LeBron said. “It sounds like additional barriers and challenges (beyond) what many families are already facing.”

Earlier this year the district convened the task force to study its student placement system, universally regarded as broken. It is also considering the related problem of reducing its excessive transportation expenses.

Preliminary proposal

The administration on Tuesday provided a set of eight recommendations, which Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small stressed were preliminary and meant to spur “good conversations.”

According to the proposal, the district would be reorganized from three placement zones to two, with the Genesee River as a dividing line. Schools eventually would be reorganized as K-5, 6-8 and 9-12.

“Pupils transported to a public school for the purpose of alleviating racial imbalance are not in like circumstances to pupils attending a nonpublic school with respect to eligibility for transportation.”

The co-chairs of the Urban-Suburban governance committee, Penfield Superintendent Tom Putnam and West Irondequoit Superintendent Aaron Johnson, said they were aware of the proposal but would not comment before they could “review the implications.”

3,500 students possibly affected

There are about 900 Rochester students in Urban-Suburban, about 900 in private and parochial schools outside the city and about 1,700 in charter schools in Greece.

Anna Hall, CEO of the New York Charter Schools Association, pointed out that represents about one in 10 students in Rochester.

“I think any solution to a transportation problem that restricts families’ access to schools of their choice isn’t an appropriate solution,” Hall said. “The premise of the task force document is to allow students access to high-quality schools; only this one recommendation seems to cut across that explicitly,” she said.

Some private and parochial schools would struggle to remain open without RCSD students arriving on buses. St. Ambrose Academy, for instance, is just a few feet over the city line on Empire Boulevard and draws two thirds of its student body from Rochester, according to state data. Bishop Kearney, also in Irondequoit, draws 28% of its students from Rochester.

School Board President Van White, speaking of Urban-Suburban in particular, feared “cutting off parents’ opportunity to successfully educate their children,” he said.

“When we say we’re going to eliminate transportation for U-S ... what that does is pulling the rug out from some parents who looked at our district and said — and understandably so — ‘There’s not enough options for my kids,’” White said.

The district hopes to finalize changes to its placement policy by the end of January, in time for the 2022-23 school year.

Students who move from the east side to the west side would need to move schools as well, something the district does not now require out of concern for further destabilizing students' lives. The proposal would also formally end the district's practice of providing a bus for some students who live less than 1.5 miles from their school, even though the state does not reimburse that expense.

Many of the proposals, including the junior high schools and the tougher rules on students attending out-of-zone schools, address concerns raised by Shelley Jallow, the state monitor.

"We're criss-crossing all over the city," Myers-Small said. Later she added: "It's not all about saving money, per se. We need to fortify the instructional component."

The board raised concerns about nearly every one of the recommendations, in particular the prohibition on busing students to a babysitter's house after school.

"I'm not sure who all participated in developing the recommendations for this, but it doesn't seem to me (it was) the people it's going to impact," Board Vice President Cynthia Elliott said. "We know this community, and with all due respect to Dr. Jallow – Dr. Jallow doesn't live in Rochester."

The district has long been responsible for transportation for Urban-Suburban students. The law does not mandate it bear that expense, but many suburban districts have made it clear their participation depends on the program not costing them any money.

State law does not require city school districts to transport charter and non-public students any farther than they transport their own students.

Urban-Suburban is a wrinkle unique to RCSD, but a state Education Department guidance document states:

"I'm hoping you come back with some stronger, better recommendations that ... meet the needs our families have," LeBron said.

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



A bus heads west on Main Street in Rochester last month. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE