

Outside violence creeps into Rochester schools

District leaders plead for help with student support

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

With school back in person five days a week for the first time since March 2020, the Rochester City School District is trying not only to address academic gaps but also to respond to students' trauma and mental health concerns – some of which have resulted in an uptick in violence in secondary schools.

East High School Superintendent Shaun Nelms warned the school board Thursday that the time away from school has ruptured relationships and created problems among students. More social-emotional support is urgently needed, he said, to prevent serious fighting in school.

“With the last 18 months being in COVID, we’re seeing an increase in gang-related activity and potential issues and I think it’s something we can’t ignore,” he said. “We need some intervention for students coming to us with trauma.”

In particular, he called for more staffing from a violence prevention group like Pathways to Peace, whose contract with the district now calls for just five intervention specialists across the district. That number is down from past levels.

East is far from the only trouble spot in the city. NorthSTAR, a small program for students with significant socialemotional needs, has been operating without a permanent lead administrator to start the year and is understaffed in other areas as well.

NorthSTAR has been chronically neglected over the years, with a revolving door of administrators and locations. Seventy-eight students are enrolled, with average attendance closer to 30, district spokeswoman Marisol Ramos-Lopez said.

In an email to Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small that was obtained by the *Democrat and Chronicle*, board member Amy Maloy described a recent visit to the program in ominous terms, saying she’d witnessed multiple crises in a short period of time with staffing levels far below what was needed.

“Someone is going to get seriously hurt in this building, or even worse, killed,” Maloy wrote. “We either need to

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shut this program down immediately and redeploy students to other high schools where they can be serviced with more staff members, OR we need to fully staff the program at Northstar immediately.”

In fact, someone did get hurt. A school security officer allegedly “used unnecessary force” against a student, Ramos-Lopez confirmed, and has been suspended while the district investigates.

The situation is serious enough that the district this week deployed both Deputy Superintendent Melody Martinez-Davis and Acting Chief of Special Education Deserie Richmond to the building as temporary

administrators until a more permanent solution can be found, Ramos- Lopez said.

The COVID-19 pandemic that interrupted school last year also coincided with a spike in violent crime in the city. Many RCSD students inevitably were affected, either as participants, bystanders or victims.

Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small said in April that six students had been killed and 13 injured over the preceding months and asked for greater community support.

Nelms said that violence has threatened to upend the work East has done in creating a supportive environment for students.

“There are some very serious things that happened in the community in the last 18 months that involved kids who are now seeing each other for the first time when they enter school,” Nelms said. “So if we had beef in the community and something happened with your cousin and my cousin, and now I finally see you for the first time – that’s what we’re dealing with.”

He said he soon will submit a resolution to the school board to approve a greater investment in Pathways to Peace or a similar organization.

Nelms also pleaded with parents to alert schools of issues that could result in disruptions at school, something that school board member and East parent Ricardo Adams echoed.

“We need all hands on deck, man,” Adans said. “Our kids need to be able to focus on education, not about where to be safe.”

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