

## Report calls for 'breakthrough' schools

Themed campuses would be diverse, inter-district

### Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The idea is simple enough: public schools focused on a particular theme, like the arts or the environment, open to students anywhere in the Rochester region, with guidelines for socioeconomic diversity.

The idea has been circulating in Rochester education circles for 15 years without nearing fruition, in particular because the basic logistical questions have proven difficult to answer: Who would run the schools, and who would pay for them?

Now, for the first time, there are some proposed answers. They are contained in a report commissioned by Great Schools for All, the Rochester non-profit group most associated with the push for what it calls breakthrough schools.

The 184-page report, written by consultants from the law firm Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, envisions schools run through BOCES, with a modification to state law allowing the Rochester City School District to participate. Such a model already exists in a regional school in the Syracuse area, and the report includes model legislation.

As for money, the report recommends exploring existing state and federal desegregation and magnet school funding sources, and notes that the current surplus of COVID-related stimulus funding could make some districts more willing to commit.

The authors concluded: "Breakthrough Schools that are socioeconomically and racially diverse and that offer unique educational opportunities not otherwise available to students in Monroe County school districts should be considered a realistic, feasible and viable option likely to improve educational outcomes and long-term success among all students, and particularly those in geographical areas with high concentrations of poverty."

### Long but fruitless history

The recent history of the breakthrough school concept dates to 2006, when former Fairport Superintendent Bill Cala, along with former New York Regent Tom Frey and education civil rights lawyer Bryan Hetherington, began discussing the idea of inter-district magnet schools.

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Cala took the idea public in 2008 and generated a great deal of discussion but no results. He blamed then-state Assembly Majority Leader Joe Morelle for spiking it in Albany; Morelle said Cala was overambitious and hadn't addressed the technical points to which the Orrick report is dedicated.

Cala spoke about his idea at Third Presbyterian Church, and a contingent of church leaders and congregants took up the general concept and carried it forward, forming Great Schools for All in 2014.

The organization has done a great deal of outreach work over seven years, including conducting polls demonstrating strong conceptual interest in breakthrough schools, but the Orrick report represents its most concrete contribution to date.

"We were pleased they gave the approaches we're thinking about a vote of confidence and indicated this isn't tilting at windmills, but doable and feasible," said Don Pryor, one of the organization's leaders.

Earlier versions of the same idea date back at least half a century; in fact, two exemplars managed to get off the ground during the Civil Rights era.

One, the Center for Innovation in Education at SUNY Brockport, operated from 1966 to 1981, with half its students coming from RCSD and the other half from the west-side suburbs. Another model was the Metropolitan World of Inquiry School, which survived for three years at rented space in Webster and West Irondequoit.

In both cases, federal start-up funding gave way and could not be replaced with local dollars.

The Orrick report calls for “adequate and continuous funding sources that account for startup costs associated with preparing a facility and opening a new school as well as operating costs.”

### **RCSD would lead**

The report places great weight on the leadership of Rochester Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small, who in her previous superintendency in Brockport was an advocate for the Urban-Suburban program and crossdistrict collaboration more generally.

The first step, according to the report authors, is a meeting including Myers-Small, the superintendents of the two BOCES and Great Schools for All. They would create a planning group which would in turn drum up interest among other local and state leaders.

Notably, Rochester Mayor-elect Malik Evans is a strong supporter of the breakthrough schools concept.

Monroe-1 BOCES Superintendent Dan White said in a statement that local superintendents would be meeting soon to discuss the report.

The Orrick report considers and rejects building upon the governance models of charter schools and Urban-Suburban. It strongly criticizes Urban-Suburban, saying the program “creates a high risk of racial and class bias,” with a funding structure that represents a “moral hazard” for suburban school districts.

The report recommends instead that students be chosen through a random lottery, with guidelines in place to ensure rough socioeconomic parity.

Myers-Small did not respond to a request for comment. While at Brockport she was co-chair of the Urban-Suburban governance committee but, since joining RCSD, has taken a cooler stance.

A transportation and student placement proposal she presented in October would put an end to RCSD busing students to the suburbs for Urban-Suburban.

“If we are having RCSD students (attend school in the suburbs), the environment has to be inclusive,” Myers-Small said in an interview last month. “You can say you have open doors, but are you really putting the systems and supports in place that make it an inclusive environment? And we’re seeing that play out right now in districts in the county. ...

“If it’s not inclusive, no matter how much better you think a district is than Rochester, it’s going to be a problem.”

State law currently prohibits large urban districts, including RCSD, from participating in BOCES; the Orrick report recommends drafting a limited exemption.

RCSD’s state-appointed monitor, Shelley Jallow, went further, saying the Legislature should repeal the law that keeps urban districts out of BOCES. The local BOCES leaders said they would support that change.

Pryor, of Great Schools for All, said he believes the time may be right for bold action. He pointed to falling local enrollment, the disruption of COVID and local superintendents' stated commitment to anti-racism.

"It's sort of a time to reflect on what we're doing educationally, post-pandemic and everything," he said. "All of these things are coming together at a time when we need to think creatively about new options."

Great Schools for All also recently released a new poll of students around the region, showing general support for the idea of inter-district magnet schools.

Contact staff writer Justin Murphy at [jmurphy7@gannett.com](mailto:jmurphy7@gannett.com).



**Brielle Burgess walks down Dunn Street in Rochester to get to her bus stop with a neighbor and friend, Anna Quinones, in 2019. Brielle caught another bus to take her to Pittsford Sutherland Highland School through the Urban-Suburban Program. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO**

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