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PROMISES MADE, PROMISES BROKEN

**Schools slated to be shuttered once seen as
exemplars**

ROCHESTER CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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RISE Community School was supposed to be the one. Not just a successful school but a thriving school, a vibrant school, a culturally connected school. A school that helped students achieve academic proficiency but also spoke to them as human beings.

- What's more: Not just a successful school but a model for *all* the schools in the district termed failing by the state Education Department.
- “The RISE model would have us focus on teaching and learning (and) renewal and really getting to the kind of curriculum that children and families are telling us they want,” Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams said in 2018.

Wilson Foundation Academy was supposed to be one end of an academically rigorous International Baccalaureate pipeline running down Genesee Street to Wilson Magnet High School.

Andrew Townson School 39 was the most prominent site for Victorious Minds Academy, a program that embodied the district's move toward restorative practice and cultural competency.

ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND
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RISE replaced Kodak Park School 41 in an

old brick building on Ridgeway Avenue in 2018. The state Education Department ordered School 41 closed for failing to meet standards and mandated major changes in leadership and faculty.

The new school wasn't supposed to be called RISE, which stands for Rochester Innovation Schools Empowered. RISE was first conceived as a framework to lift all of the city's struggling schools. But teachers were so smitten with the RISE concept during the planning process that the name stuck.

Such was their confidence in the new model.

That was five years ago — recently enough that children who entered School 41 as kindergartners are still there to see the school board vote to close RISE this week.

Superintendent Carmine Peluso proposed closing 11 current schools as part of a sweeping reconfiguration plan. Like RISE, many of them were seen recently as possible exemplars for the entire district. Collectively the schools to be closed represent a graveyard of reform in the district. The plans were flawed or underresourced from the beginning, or else were abandoned with a change in leadership.

State mandates for change in Rochester schools 'unreasonable'

In the case of RISE, the state Education Department gave the district less than a year to completely redesign a new school to replace School 41. District administrators were scrambling to create a framework, hire leaders and find seats for affected students while at the same time developing a budget.

"This process is unfolding incredibly quickly," School Board President Van White said in February 2018. "We're opening up a new school in a time frame that's totally unreasonable, but that's what we have to do."

The independent state monitor overseeing the school called it "an exciting place to be" during its first year, but it did not take long for

familiar problems to emerge.

Students at RISE “struggle with consistently attending school, maintaining positive behavior and engagement in academic achievement,” according to the most recent progress report to the state.

“It was way better when it was 41,” Fatinma DuBoise said. She’s had three children at the school on Ridgeway Avenue, including her son Maliek, who’s now in sixth grade.

The main difference, she said, was the very thing that was supposed to drive the reform: a heavy focus on math and reading that she believes made students dislike being there.

“When my older kids went there it was fun; there were a lot of activities,” DuBoise said. “(Now), it’s more like a penitentiary. ... Less activities for the kids to do, less interactions with students and teachers. Just in class all day.”

Another mother who has seen both schools, Tasha Nelson, said it’s been a good place for her daughter, now in third grade. But her explanation offered little evidence of the grand changes promised in 2018.

“They said they were just changing the name and certain staff members and stuff like that,” Nelson said. “I didn’t see a difference, really.”

Victorious Minds Academy, IB pipeline abandoned

At Andrew Townson School 39 in the city’s northwest, the district saw tremendous promise just five years ago in a program called the Victorious Minds Academy. It was based on antiracism, cultural competency and personal connections with students. In the program’s first year, students in the Victorious Minds Academy classrooms reported feeling more supported at school and suspensions at School 39 were reduced by half.

“We know what we need to do; now people need to get behind us and support us,” said Melanie Funchess, a board member at the

time. “Over the course of time, we can have our entire district operating this way.”

Two years later, most of the key district leaders who had championed the program were gone, either voluntarily or otherwise. The program is not mentioned on School 39’s website and receives only one oblique mention in the state-mandated school improvement plan.

Across town on Genesee Street, the K-8 Wilson Foundation Academy recently was a key part of a plan to revitalize Wilson Magnet High School. The latter is famously home to the International Baccalaureate program, but by 2014 almost no students there were participating.

Superintendent Bolgen Vargas vowed to restore it, starting with increased exposure for students at Wilson Foundation Academy. There would be a pipeline between the two schools, the district announced, based on both geography and shared academic excellence.

In 2021-22, though, just 30 of the high school’s 700 students were taking either IB or Advanced Placement courses. Wilson Foundation Academy, meanwhile, had to fend off being evicted from its building and has struggled recently with key staff vacancies.

Northeast College Prep loses its chance

Those schools saw declines over several years. Northeast College Prep High School’s downfall was more precipitous.

Just last year the school was relocated to the Charlotte campus, where it replaced the closed Leadership Academy for Young Men. It was touted as a social justice-oriented high school that would focus on restorative justice and help students find their own voices.

“This year is very important,” Principal Nakia Burrows told incoming students in August 2022. “We’re trying to help you unpack and unlock your abilities so you can bless us with them and be that change in the world.”

The challenge from the start was daunting. It was RCSD's first year back from COVID-19, a time marked by student trauma and violence in schools. More than 250 Leadership students had to be integrated with the pre-existing Northeast students.

Even since the pending closure was announced last month, school leaders said that more than 90 new students have been placed at Northeast.

"They are messing (up) our plans to continue to be a social justice school that was promised to us," one student said, according to Gina Porretta-Baker, a Northeast teacher who gathered student comments. "We are going to have to switch everything up — our teachers, our adult support system, our friends, and for the second time, we are going to have to (navigate) a new school."

In its receivership report, school leaders said 2022-23 was "rich in worthwhile experiences but also filled with tenacity and major transition." They predicted better things for 2023-24.

School Board President Cynthia Elliott said she doesn't think of success in terms of programs but rather consistent fundamentals: "Basic things, like love and care for the kids and the community," she said.

"For me, models come and go. You've got to have stable leadership and commitment from the staff to get it done."

RCSD approves closures

The Rochester school board voted 5-2 on Thursday to approve Peluso's school closure plan. Dozens of students and faculty members appeared at the meeting to protest.

James Patterson and Camille Simmons voted against the plan. They asked for more time to think of other ways to achieve the district's goals, including the grade-level realignment, without such drastic action.

The plan closes 11 schools and opens five.

Several other schools will move buildings, while the district's many K-8 schools will be trimmed to K-6.

The district said last week that it anticipates a \$9.6 million reduction in unrestricted state aid, its largest revenue category, for the 2024-25 budget. That, combined with the expiration of federal stimulus funds, points to a challenging budget year.

Justin Murphy is a veteran reporter at the Democrat and Chronicle and author of "Your Children Are Very Greatly in Danger: School Segregation in Rochester, New York." Follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/CitizenMurphy or contact him at jmurphy7@gannett.com.

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