



To: The Rochester School Board
From: Kent Pekel, Ed.D, Interim Superintendent
Subject: Staff Planning and Wellbeing and Secondary School Safety Update
Date: November 16, 2021

As all of you are aware, to varying degrees, a small group of students are regularly resisting adult authority in our middle schools and high schools. This resistance has ranged from refusal to go to class to verbal abuse of staff. While we have not received a formal report from a staff member that they have been physically assaulted by a student, there has been a physical aspect to some of the episodes of defiance that suggests that we need to take proactive steps to ensure that does not occur. In addition to the inappropriate behavior that some students have directed toward staff, there has also been an increase in fighting among students in some of our secondary schools.

It is important to note that these challenges are not unique to Rochester Public Schools. A recent [blog post](#) that I received from one of our principals described the national situation in the following terms: “There is a clear crisis of disrespect sweeping the country. Every day it seems we hear stories from teachers of remarkable brazenness and rude behavior. Maybe it’s the year spent at home. Maybe it’s the lack of human connection. Maybe it’s the addiction to social media and smart phones. Maybe it’s the anger and frustration that seems to be affecting everyone from airline passengers to highway drivers. Regardless, we have to adjust.”

In Rochester Public Schools, we are adjusting to this reality through a multi-faceted strategy that seeks to address the challenges of the moment while also putting us on a course to find and implement systemic solutions to this extremely complex situation. This strategy has been developed over the past six weeks in collaboration with our secondary school principals and school district staff. I look forward to providing board members with more information on the evolving strategy in the weeks ahead, but, in brief, here are the steps we are taking at this time:

Developing School-wide Strategies: While support from the school district’s central administration is a key component of addressing defiant student behaviors, ultimately the solutions will be found at the school level. Given that reality, leaders from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will be working with each school’s principal and other staff to ensure that each school community has identified the specific students and the specific problem behaviors that need to be addressed, and has agreed upon a set of positive and effective ways they will respond to those behaviors individually and collectively. The time I have spent in a number of our secondary schools in recent weeks has indicated that the development of this type of a school-wide strategy has not yet occurred in some of those schools, leaving individual staff members to respond (or not respond) to student behaviors in different ways. A number of those staff members have told me that the ways they are currently responding are not leading to

changes in student behavior. Given that situation, here are the steps that we will working with the leadership of each school to take to develop a comprehensive strategy to address the behavior of defiant students:

1. Identify the students who have repeatedly refused to respond to requests and directions from staff
2. With as much specificity as possible, define the different ways that those students are refusing to respond to requests and directions and note any differences in the ways those students are responding. For example, some students may passively refuse to respond to staff directions without defiance while others may respond with explicit defiance and even profanity.
3. Have informal conversations with students and among staff to discuss the reasons that students might be refusing to respond to adult authority.
4. Participate in the Perspectives Project being led by the school district's Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to gain a more detailed understanding student and staff perspectives on behavior issues through structured focus groups and interviews.
5. Identify and agree upon specific steps that staff members and school leaders will take respond to students' refusal to refuse to accept direction from staff.
6. Continuously evaluate and, as necessary, adjust the effectiveness of the steps you have agreed staff can or will take to respond to these student behavior challenges.

Conducting the Perspectives Project: Executive Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Will Ruffin II and our team of equity specialists are working with me to plan and conduct focus groups and interviews with students who have been involved in our disciplinary process and with staff in our secondary schools who are also impacted by that process. The purpose of the Perspectives Project is to investigate, understand, and positively respond to the issues that are influencing the problematic that are regularly occurring in our schools. The insights we gain from this process will help us develop strategies to strengthen our school cultures for all students that can and will be integrated into the strategic action plan that will guide the work of our school district in the years ahead. Here are the questions that Will and his team will be asking of both our students and our staff members with support from Wilder Research, our research partner in developing the RPS Strategic Action Plan:

Student Focus Group Questions

1. How is this school year going for you? What, if anything, has been really good about it? What, if anything, has been really bad about it?
2. Is there an adult who works in this school who you like and respect and whose directions you always or almost always follow? If so, who is that person and what do they do that causes you to respect them and take direction from them?
3. Why do you think students sometimes don't do what adults tell them to do in this school?

4. When a student refuses to do what an adult tells them to do in this school, what do you think the adult should do in response?
5. Why do you think students sometimes skip classes? Are there things that teachers could do that would make those students want to go to class?
6. Is there anything else that you want people in your school to know about you?

Staff Focus Group Questions

1. How is this school year going for you? What, if anything, has been really good about it? What, if anything, has been really bad about it?
2. Is there a student in this school who you really connect with? If so, why do you think you have that connection?
3. Why do you think students sometimes don't do what adults tell them to do in this school?
4. When a student refuses to do what an adult tells them to do in this school, what do you think the adult should do in response?
5. Why do you think students sometimes skip classes? Are there things that teachers could do that would make those students want to go to class?
6. What are the most important things you think this school could do to create a community where all students can thrive?

Adding Targeted Positions and Supports: We will also use a portion of our remaining federal funds that are intended to help students recover from the trauma and difficulties of the pandemic to add select positions to enhance the capacity of our secondary schools to meet the needs of our students who are struggling the most. We are finalizing plans for these new positions this week in collaboration with our secondary school principals, but I can report that the request for additional staff that has been raised most frequently has been to increase the number of Equity Specialists in our district. Multiple school leaders have told us that they would like to increase the amount of time that Equity Specialists spend at their schools, potentially including assigning such a specialist to their schools on a full-time basis. Other requests for additional staff that we have received include additional paraprofessionals and also Resiliency Specialists. Of course, adding positions with federal funding that must be expended by the end of 2024 raises questions of sustainability, so we will consider these requests for additional staff with both the short-term and long-term implications in mind. In addition to adding these targeted positions, we are also planning to use federal funding to implement software for tracking and reporting behavioral incidents at all schools that has proven to be highly effective at John Adams Middle School.

Affirming Our Disciplinary Policies and Procedures: We have also worked with principals in all of our secondary schools to revisit our school district's existing policies and procedures to ensure that they are aware of and fully utilizing all of the disciplinary tools at their disposal.

More specifically, we have developed a new protocol for dealing with defiant students that is fully aligned with school district policy but that also addresses the unique challenges our schools face as students continue to adapt to the challenges of returning to learning in person. That protocol requires dialog with each student about their behavior and engagement of parents and guardians in efforts to address that behavior. It also makes clear that disrupting the learning environment with defiant behavior can result in suspension after those supportive steps to address defiant behavior have been taken. District staff are working closely with school leaders to implement this protocol, especially when a student who receives special education services is involved. I have directed that this protocol will be in place until February 1, 2022, after which time we will evaluate the need for its continued use.

Enhanced Case Planning for Students Receiving Special Education Services: Leaders from our school district's Department of Student Services are also holding meetings that bring together a group of building and district staff to brainstorm and discuss ideas to help develop individual support plans for students who demonstrate defiant behaviors. These plans are correlated to the students' Individual Education Programs and target behaviors in the functional behavior assessment and behavior intervention plan, as well as social emotional and mental health needs. Staff who are involved in these meetings include the grade level administrator, Director of Special Education, Behavior and Mental Health (BAMH) coach, special education instructional and behavior coach, and other service providers who have information that would be helpful in the developing the plans, such as social workers and mental health practitioners. The intent of these meetings is for relevant staff to problem-solve innovative and creative ideas to support the student. At the conclusion of the meeting, next steps are created which may include an IEP Team meeting to review and approve the plan.

Restorative Practices Working Group: To lay the groundwork for longer-term and more systemic efforts to address the issues that prompt and influence student defiance and other problem behaviors, we are also convening a new working group to examine restorative justice practices that our schools and other programs may want to adopt through implementation of the RPS Strategic Action Plan. Through our strategic planning process, the organizational culture working group is already considering this issue as part of the broader work they are doing, but the current behavior challenges that our schools are facing has convinced me that we need to convene an additional group to take a very intensive look at restorative practices and how they might be utilized in our schools. I am attaching to this email a good overview of such practices from the Learning Policy Institute.

It is important to note that staff at the school and district levels are taking all of these steps to address the defiant behavior that a small but significant group of our students are demonstrating amidst many other challenges, from staffing shortages to our efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in our schools. It is critical that we remain attentive to those other challenges even as we work with staff to address problems of student behavior. Please reach out to me if you want to discuss any of these approaches in greater detail, and to share your own observations about what is occurring in our schools and positive and proactive ways we can move forward together.