

**Rochester Board of Education**  
**Finance Committee Meeting of the Whole**  
**April 4, 2013**

**Attendance:** Commissioner Powell (Chair); Commissioners Evans, White, Cruz, and Adams (via Internet). Parent Representative: Giancarlo Giannini.

District Staff: Superintendent Vargas; Bill Ansbro, Chief Financial Officer; Vern Connors, Budget Director; Anita Murphy, Deputy Superintendent for Administration; and Beverly Burrell-Moore, Deputy Superintendent for Teaching & Learning.

Commissioner Powell convened the meeting at 6:02PM, noting that this evening's meeting will include review of Section 1 ("Introduction and Overview"), Section 2 ("Policies, Priorities, and Plans"), and Section 3 ("District-wide Summary Budget") of the Superintendent's proposed 2013-14 RCSD budget. She stated that review of Section 4 (School Profiles and Budgets) can also begin if time permits. Commissioner Powell emphasized the importance of Board members having the time and opportunity to ask all of their questions, so that their vote can be cast informatively and confidently. She offered an opportunity for the Superintendent to present opening remarks.

Superintendent Vargas commended staff for the time and effort expended in developing the budget and responding to questions and concerns of constituents.

Commissioner Cruz requested a description of the "whole school reform model" referred to in Section 1, p. 4 of the Budget Book, and asked about the fiscal impact of adopting this model. The Superintendent replied that the State has delineated six areas in which school performance is to be evaluated:

- Curriculum
- Instruction
- Assessment
- Systematic and comprehensive data analysis
- Family and community engagement
- Leadership and management capacity (i.e. how well Central Office management supports school administrators, and how well school administrators support teachers)

The Superintendent reported that the State is using a much more comprehensive view of interactions within the entire school system, rather than focusing on specific components.

Commissioner Evans inquired about the current status of shifting to neighborhood schools and changing the District's transportation structure, and the savings anticipated from using this approach. Superintendent Vargas explained that legislation is required to allow the District to provide transportation to students within the 1.5-mile distance limit and obtain reimbursement for these costs. He stated that an estimate of the cost savings from these changes has not yet

been determined, but the District has made a commitment to the State to maintain transportation costs at or below current levels.

The Superintendent noted the need to implement a number of changes before restructuring the RCSD transportation system: reducing the number of students transported across zones; revising the Parent Preference/Managed Choice policy (5153); and informing families of the impact and their options. He pointed out that these measures would have to be taken after the authorizing legislation has been approved. He stated that the District plans to implement these changes gradually over three to five years, beginning on a pilot basis.

Anita Murphy recalled that this initiative originated in the Board Policy Committee, with Commissioners Cruz and Powell spearheading a committee to examine the operational aspects of the existing Transportation policy (8400) and factors affecting families' choice of schools. She stated that changes to the transportation structure have not been incorporated into the proposed 2013-14 budget because this has not yet been authorized by the NYS legislature, but a plan has been created for phasing in implementation.

Bill Ansbro reported that he met with the leadership of the NYS Assembly to discuss this proposed legislation. He stated that the NYS Assembly leaders considered this at some length, particularly since there is no fiscal impact at the State level. Mr. Ansbro noted that he expects to resume these discussions with legislative leaders in the near future.

Commissioner White asked about the large reductions in federal and local grant revenue anticipated for 2013-14, and the rationale for the District failing to obtain these grant awards. He also questioned whether the grant funds were for programs valuable to the District, and whether plans have been developed to replace funds for those programs. Ms. Murphy replied that some of the grant-funded programs are valuable to the District, but the budget does not include revenue that has not yet been awarded. She asserted that the District does expect to have a number of these grants reissued.

Ms. Murphy clarified that some grants are ending because they were not intended to continue indefinitely (e.g. SIG I Cohort grant for three years). She stated that some of the items covered under the grants are now covered in the General Fund, while other grants were specifically designed to build staff capacity (e.g. Teaching as Historians, TAH A Historical Journey grants) for a specific period of time.

Commissioner White expressed concern about the District's history of developing programs around funding streams and then discontinuing the program when the funds are no longer available – regardless of the effectiveness of the program. He inquired about the District establishing mechanisms to find funding for effective programs to ensure their continuity and stability, pointing out that the proposed budget does not include information to indicate which programs are effective. Superintendent Vargas announced that he would like to engage in a planning process over the next year to enable the District to identify the specific grants that will be ending over the next three years and the programs associated with them. He stated that long-range planning is essential to locate funds to support effective programs, but the District does not

currently have this infrastructure in place. The Superintendent reported that he hopes to collaborate with the Gates Foundation to assist with this type of long-range planning.

Ms. Murphy offered to include information in the next Budget Book (i.e. 2014-15) to identify grants that are intended to build capacity, and those that are available for longer term purposes.

The Superintendent emphasized the importance of having a long-range planning process in place for resource allocation, program development and implementation, and grant funding. He noted that the rationale for applying for each specific grant must be examined to ensure that funds are aligned with effective programs and the District's overall mission. He also discussed creating an infrastructure to evaluate program outcomes to ensure that funds are sought for effective programs and to support applications for funding.

Commissioner Evans inquired as to how the District can work with external organizations to help them leverage grant funds to meet the needs of students and families, so that the school system does not have to fund and operate all of these programs and services. Superintendent Vargas agreed that this type of collaboration is not only possible, but to our mutual benefit. He cited the example of RCSD supporting various initiatives in the community to improve child nutrition because of the impact on academic performance. The Superintendent stated that the District primarily assists community organizations in applying for grants that would benefit our students and families by providing a letter of support. He acknowledged that the District could also assist with improved planning, describing the needs within the community, and sharing data with these organizations.

Commissioner Cruz pointed out that many smaller community organizations do not have the capacity for grant research and development. He suggested that the District conduct a grants consortium with local agencies to exchange information about possible threats to existing funding and to identify potential new funding sources. He also noted that the District could benefit by becoming involved in strategic planning with these organizations, and by gathering information about services that affect our students and families.

Superintendent Vargas replied that he would like to consider this idea, particularly in light of the expertise of the staff in the RCSD Grants Office and the importance of fostering collaborative relationships with community organizations.

**Action Item: Mr. Ansbro will report to the Board within the next month regarding plans and a timeline for conducting a Grants Consortium with community organizations to exchange information and enhance sustainability of services affecting RCSD students and families.**

Commissioner Cruz observed that many of the District's community partners are challenged by the lack of integration between our data systems. He asserted that the District has expended a great deal on information systems, software, database development, and technology, and needs to create a unified system that any agency can access. Commissioner Cruz discussed the significance of disseminating information in an integrated way to facilitate collaboration and also

enable the District to gather agency information to obtain a more complete view of our students. He stated that this would be a truly community-wide database system.

Ms. Murphy reported that she is currently working with community organizations to assist with data collection. She commented on the importance of RCSD knowing the number of students and families receiving specific services in the community, particularly in being able to evaluate the efficacy of programs and services. Ms. Murphy asserted that the Monroe County Department of Social Services should be included in any community-wide database system. She stated that this type of data exchange is already being done in other districts in the State, and there is no reason it could not be implemented here.

Commissioner Powell stated that she would like to explore this idea further, describing an initiative in the past with Monroe County to coordinate services for the elderly. She stated that the program was discontinued because of increasing costs, as individuals learned of the services available and had greater access to them.

Commissioner Adams submitted the following questions in writing via the Internet:

- Could we please get a little more clarity on the reserve fund for teaching positions that are currently not allocated, but which will be allocated? (for any teaching staff other than for instrumental music)
- Is there a place within the current budget document where the central subfund for unallocated teacher positions can be found? How much is it?

Ms. Murphy described the past practice of allocating a specific number of staff to a school, which would be used as the basis for determining the schedule and the courses to offer. For 2013-14, she stated that the core Master Schedule was established for Math, English, Science, and Social Studies, with all of the electives at the secondary level put in the teacher reserve. Ms. Murphy explained that the elective courses offered by a secondary school will be based on students' completed course requests. She stated that principals have submitted their list of course requests, which will be used to determine the staffing from the teacher reserve.

Ms. Murphy explained that the teacher reserve is used at the elementary level for courses offered in addition to basic requirements (e.g. instrumental music, art).

Beverly Burrell-Moore noted that the process for secondary students to select their courses will be completed by April 27<sup>th</sup>, so information as to the categories for teacher assignments will be available at that time.

Commissioner Evans expressed concern about schools lacking the teaching staff to offer all of the courses that they would like. He acknowledged that this problem should be alleviated with the new process of determining the courses to offer and then assigning staff according to course requests.

Commissioner Evans questioned the methods used to ensure that staffing is based on enrollment, and that the enrollment figures are reconciled between the Central Office and the schools. Superintendent Vargas responded that this process requires an excellent database system, and the Placement Office, principals and teachers have been diligent in ensuring the accuracy of the data in the system. He pointed out that the accuracy and quality of the data is essential to planning efforts, citing an example from his first year of tenure in which one school requested staffing for an additional 139 students. He stated that further investigation showed that these students had not attended school for at least the last year. Superintendent Vargas cited this example to illustrate that allocating funds and staff to schools on this basis creates waste and inequities across the District.

Mr. Ansbrow pointed out that there are situations in which the District and/or a particular school can have an unexpected influx of students (e.g. refugees), which would be covered by the budget reserve. He reported that the budget reserve is typically less than 1% of the total budget.

Commissioner White observed that the Administration and management team have been working to promote stability in allocating staff, obtaining grants, and managing the student population. He commended the Administration for these efforts, noting that student and staff stability is essential for promoting learning.

Ms. Murphy stated that the new Master Schedule enables a child to leave the Placement Office with a class schedule, and the system adjusts to reflect the number of children in each class so that classrooms will not become overloaded.

Commissioner Evans requested clarification as to whether all students have a class schedule prior to the beginning of the school year. The Superintendent replied that this was one of the primary concerns Commissioner Evans had brought to his attention when he assumed his current position as superintendent. He stated that a robust system has been created to track student placement in classes and changes in class size in every school. Superintendent Vargas also pointed out that encouraging parents to attend orientation prior to the start of the school year has enabled the District to address concerns/problems early.

Ms. Murphy reported that the centralized Master Schedule has facilitated the placement and staffing process, ensuring that students are able to take the core courses needed to graduate on time. She stated that the centralized schedule also ensures that the District is meeting all statutory requirements in terms of courses offered.

Commissioner Adams wrote a question for clarification: "In other words, the amount of teacher reserve funds will be determined by course selections ---- is that correct?" Ms. Murphy replied that the teacher reserve is contained in the school reserve budgets. She explained that these funds are reflected in the secondary school budgets under electives, other subjects, or enrichment. In the elementary school budgets, the teacher reserve is shown as the classes offered opposite Art because Art classes can only accommodate 15 students.

Commissioner Powell inquired whether there are any circumstances in which the teacher reserve might not be adequate in accommodating the student population. Ms. Murphy responded that

unexpected increases or influx of student population would be accommodated through use of the budget reserve to provide additional sections and/or staff. She noted that changes in student enrollment would also affect the amount of NYS Aid provided to the District. Ms. Murphy stated that additional bilingual or ESOL students could require use of the budget reserve because these classes must be staffed in a certain way to meet NYS mandates.

Commissioner Powell questioned whether actual changes in enrollment will affect the amount of NYS Aid because RCSD student enrollment figures have been frozen for the last few years for purposes of Aid calculation. Ms. Murphy confirmed that the overall RCSD student enrollment has been frozen with regard to the amount of NYS Aid, but additional bilingual or ESOL students would entitle the District to additional Title III funding.

Commissioner Powell asked about the assumptions regarding charter schools, noting that there are organizations in the process of applying to establish new charter schools. She asked about the possibility of any of the existing charter schools losing their charter. Ms. Murphy responded that none of the existing charter schools are to lose their charter in 2013-14, and some of these schools will be expanding. She stated that the 2013-14 budget was based on current RCSD student enrollment, so a decline will lead to more staff with fewer students. Ms. Murphy stated that January 2013 student enrollment figures were used to build the 2013-14 staffing model and Master Schedule.

Commissioner Powell discussed the possibility of charging tuition for foreign exchange students attending RCSD schools, inquiring whether the District has a method for identifying these students and the number of these students projected for 2013-14. She also asked about the status of obtaining tuition for foreign exchange students. Ms. Murphy reported that Vicky Ramos (Director of Student Placement) is currently working with principals to obtain accurate data regarding foreign exchange students. She pointed out that the State establishes non-resident tuition rates for RCSD, which has been set at zero.

Commissioner Powell questioned the rationale for the State setting the non-resident tuition rate at zero, and preventing the District from charging foreign exchange students. She asked whether the District could petition the State to change this rate. Commissioner Powell reported that school districts in the North country are petitioning at the federal level to allow foreign exchange students to stay for more than 10 months, so that their classrooms can be filled and additional revenue can be obtained through tuition charges.

Commissioner Evans reported that the issue of allowing foreign exchange students to remain in the country for more than 10 months has been on the legislative agenda of the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA) for the last five years.

Mr. Connors explained that non-resident tuition rates are established for each school district according to financial information reported to the State each year. He clarified that the purpose is to determine the local cost for educating students, with non-resident rates being most commonly used by school districts to charge each other for the cost of educating students in foster care. Mr. Connors stated that RCSD would charge non-resident tuition for a student in foster care attending a District school. He noted that the tuition would be charged to the district

in which the student resided before entering the foster care system. Conversely, non-resident tuition would be charged to RCSD for any student who lived in the District prior to entering the foster care system and who attends school in another district. Mr. Connors reported that non-resident tuition has not been charged to foreign exchange students because they have not been systematically identified or documented in RCSD data systems.

Ms. Murphy pointed out that foreign exchange students should be included in the BEDS student enrollment data provided to the State.

Commissioner Evans reported that at least one new charter school is slated to open in 2013-14, with another seven schools currently in the application process. He observed that the Buffalo City School District currently has 15 charter schools, with an additional two charter schools in Erie County that draw students from Buffalo.

Superintendent Vargas contended that the increasing presence of charter schools makes improving District planning processes even more imperative. He stated that the fact that charter schools typically start out on a small scale allows the District time to make these necessary improvements. The Superintendent described the way in which enhanced student achievement within the District will create greater pressure on SUNY and the Board of Regents to scrutinize applications for new charter schools and to re-evaluate renewal applications for existing schools. He emphasized the need for long-term planning to mitigate the loss of students to charter schools and to improve student achievement.

Commissioner White discussed the possibility of creating a new innovative school in the district in tandem with efforts to raise student achievement. He underscored the need for a simultaneous initiative because students and families will continue to leave the District until improvement efforts yield significant results. Commissioner White acknowledged concern about the District's history of opening a number of schools at the same time, some of which were not effective. He stated that he is not suggesting this, but encouraging consideration of opening one to two schools based on local and national practices that have demonstrated results. The Superintendent responded that the process of developing and opening a new school cannot be rushed if it is to be effective. He also pointed out that the District already has excess facility capacity, which leads to inefficiencies in terms of staffing and utilization of resources. He contended that opening and closing schools is not a strategy in and of itself: the only real strategy is to improve existing schools. Superintendent Vargas also expressed concern about the message that would be conveyed to parents and students by focusing on creation of a new school, rather than improving the quality of the District's existing schools. He also pointed out that students and families are not leaving a particular school – they are leaving the District. He discussed the importance of examining these issues systemically and of considering the timing and context of new initiatives.

Commissioner Cruz inquired about the responsibilities and tasks assumed by the parent liaisons, as well as the way in which the 2013-14 budget addresses the gap between positions that need to be filled and the number of college graduates that are unable to find teaching positions. Ms. Murphy replied that RCSD prepared an application for a competitive grant from the State, part of which includes developing a recruitment process for hard-to-fill positions and providing stipends for current RCSD teachers to pursue certification in these areas. She stated that development of

current RCSD teachers is preferable, and there are many opportunities in the 2013-14 budget to fill these types of positions with highly effective teachers.

**Action Item: Ms. Murphy will provide to the Board the plan for creating a recruitment process for hard-to-fill positions within the District.**

Commissioner Adams wrote the following question: “In reference to Section 1, p. 10 of the Budget Book, is there an expectation of savings from the Special Education classroom reorganization? I understand that savings are to be generated from reductions in the number of school psychologists, reclassifying Special Education Coordinators, and classroom reorganization.” Ms. Burrell-Moore replied that the redesign of Special Education involves reorganization within the department itself, as well as building on the successes of the Teacher Coordinators and using case managers instead to coordinate services to students with disabilities. She stated that further discussions will be held in the coming week, and offered to provide additional information at that time regarding the re-design. Ms. Burrell-Moore emphasized that the re-design does not involve any reductions in services to the classroom or to students with disabilities, and the projected savings arises from reorganization at the central departmental level.

Commissioner Adams also inquired: “Will there be classroom ratio changes with the classroom reorganization and re-design of Special Education?” Ms. Burrell-Moore stated that no classrooms for Special Education will be closed, and the class ratios are determined by the needs of the students as specified in their Individual Educational Plan (IEP). She described examining the classifications of students with disabilities and improving grouping of students with similar needs. Ms. Burrell-Moore clarified that the purpose is to improve instruction for these students rather than to generate cost savings.

Commissioner Powell stated that it is difficult to comprehend how the District does not need all of the current school psychologists on staff. She asserted that while the overall student population is declining, the District continues to have many students with significant needs. Ms. Burrell-Moore reported that some of the school psychologists are on special assignment, and the 2013-14 budget involves a minimal number of reductions in these positions, with 60.5 FTE remaining. She emphasized that the proposed reductions in school psychologist staff will have no impact on services to students, noting that school counselors and social workers will be expected to play a greater role in problem-solving, Response to Intervention (RTI), and meeting with parents.

Ms. Murphy pointed out that school psychologists primarily perform testing and evaluation of students that have IEPs, rather than delivering services to children. She discussed development of a wraparound service model to meet the needs of the child and to focus on the whole child, rather than the services provided by each specialty. Ms. Murphy stated that the District has clinical social workers to provide direct services to children with IEPs, and the cost of these services is reimbursed through Medicaid.

Commissioner Powell asked whether the reason that Medicaid does not provide reimbursement for school psychologists’ services is due to the fact that they do not provide direct services. Ms.

Murphy confirmed that this is the rationale for Medicaid to deny coverage for school psychologists' services.

Commissioner Powell questioned the rationale for NYSSBA to advocate for obtaining Medicaid reimbursement for school psychologist services. Ms. Murphy replied that many school districts do not have clinical social workers on staff and rely on school psychologists to provide direct services to students with disabilities, and therefore are unable to obtain Medicaid reimbursement.

Commissioner Powell inquired where a child would go for services in a crisis situation. Ms. Burrell-Moore responded that this depends on the school and the relationships students have with different staff members at the school. She stated that crisis intervention services could be provided by a school social worker, counselor, or through a Student Support Center.

Commissioner Powell noted that many of the speakers at the public budget hearings objected to proposed cuts to Student and Family Support Centers in the schools, and asked whether these services will be reduced. Ms. Murphy replied that Student and Family Support Centers were originally supported by a grant, which required an administrator to coordinate services. She clarified that the service providers in each of the Student and Family Support Centers are now being asked to coordinate the services offered in the school, and the proposed staffing cuts are to administrator positions that were initially grant-funded.

Parent Representative Giancarlo Giannini inquired about the process recommended for parents to address concerns about staffing or curriculum at the school level. Superintendent Vargas replied that these concerns are best addressed by the building principal, but parents can also contact the Chief of Staff or the Superintendent's office. He announced that he will be speaking to several different parent groups shortly about their budget concerns. The Superintendent stated that he would like the principal to be the first contact to respond to questions or concerns regarding particular programs at the school, but he noted that there have been misunderstandings in these communications in the past (e.g. the International Baccalaureate (IB) program). He noted that his office has to get involved to clarify the situation when these misunderstandings occur, citing the example of the IB program. Superintendent Vargas stated that he will do everything possible to support the IB program, but that he does not want to promote students who are not ready for the next grade level and jeopardize their opportunities for success.

Commissioner Powell asked about the basis for the common misunderstanding among parents that the District was dismantling the IB program in the 2013-14 budget. Ms. Murphy replied that part of the misunderstanding was due to the belief that all students must be on an accelerated path, and take courses one year ahead of their current grade level to become an IB student (e.g. take all 9<sup>th</sup> grade classes in 8<sup>th</sup> grade). She explained that she has been consulting with the NYS Education Department to determine the grade level of these students, and whether they are being cheated out of one year of high school. Ms. Murphy reported that she has met with the principals of these schools several times, mapping a staffing plan and schedule for IB-matriculated students. She emphasized that the IB program is intact as a Diploma Program and a Middle Years Program, and that students will be given all of the essentials needed to be successful in these programs.

Superintendent Vargas remarked that the standard practice in Monroe County school districts is to offer accelerated courses in Math (e.g. algebra), Science (e.g. earth science, biology), and a foreign language. He noted that the Superintendent is required to be involved in the process for students to advance to college-level courses to ensure that each student is actually ready. The Superintendent cautioned against planning based on assumptions about students, pointing out that a student who has struggled with advanced level classes should not continue on an accelerated path.

Commissioner Cruz inquired about data identifying the factors affecting low attendance rates. He noted that feedback is obtained when District staff canvas students' homes, but this only represents a small portion of students with attendance issues. Commissioner Cruz suggested sending a short survey to all parents to obtain additional information to indicate the specific factors affecting attendance, so that the District can respond to these issues more effectively. Superintendent Vargas replied that attendance was examined in detail at four different schools in the District, and medical and transportation concerns were found to be the main factors. He noted that families will be surveyed to capture information in a more sophisticated way, but the primary reasons for poor attendance are known at this point. The Superintendent stated that he is focusing on the kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level because these are formative years in which children's expectations and habits are developed with regard to attending school. He discussed engaging families to a greater extent to reassure them of the resources and staff available at the school to address their child's medical needs (e.g. asthma), and to impress upon them the impact of low attendance on their child's potential academic achievement. Superintendent Vargas described efforts at School No. 9 to engage students and encourage attendance by offering programs that appeal to children, such as art, music, drama and sports. He underscored the importance of adopting a holistic view of the ways in which the District, community and parents can address the factors affecting student attendance.

Ms. Murphy stated that this will be the first year that the District has conducted a large-scale survey of all students and families to learn their thoughts and perceptions about RCSD schools. She pointed out the importance of families completing and returning the survey so that the District can review this information and take action on this basis.

Commissioner White suggested that the District have a Parent Report Card to evaluate parents' efforts in supporting their child's education. He noted that this Report Card can focus not only on attendance and student performance, but also on the actions taken by parents to encourage their child's educational achievement, such as:

- Attendance
- Nutrition
- Parents attending Parent – Teacher conferences
- Parents reading to their child

Commissioner White pointed out that the District cannot assume responsibility for parents, but can identify ways to engage and encourage parents to participate in their child's education. Superintendent Vargas discussed ways in which the District has been expanding parents' access to information regarding their child's education, through ParentConnect and having a parent

liaison in every school. He contended that the District has to raise awareness of the avenues available to address the information needs of parents.

Commissioner White stated that the District needs to examine the percentage of parents in each school that use ParentConnect, and encourage parents to reflect upon their role in educating their children.

Commissioner Powell commented on other ways to make the system more responsive to parents:

- By District staff asking parents follow-up questions and/or providing additional information in response to parents' concerns (e.g. when a parent complains of multiple phone calls from school regarding their child being absent, and their child has been sick for several days)
- By increasing interactive communication with parents (e.g. including information on ParentConnect regarding their child being in detention after school for a certain period of time, so that parents know when their child has to be picked up from school)

Commissioner Cruz inquired about the fiscal impact of universal eligibility for free and reduced-price meals in the District. Ms. Murphy responded that this figure has not yet been determined because the request for reimbursement has not yet been completed, but the District does expect an additional \$800K - \$1M because students have been eating more meals. She pointed out that the law requires additional revenue to be kept in the School Lunch Fund, but this revenue could be used to upgrade cafeterias and kitchens and to reinvest in Food Services equipment. Ms. Murphy clarified that while the District has 100% eligibility for free and reduced-price meals, documentation still has to be completed to demonstrate continued eligibility. She stated that there has been an intensive staff effort to obtain this documentation.

Commissioner Powell commented that additional work must be done to raise teachers' awareness of the importance of children eating lunch – not only because of the issue of wasting food, but in terms of nutrition and their readiness to learn.

**Motion** by Commissioner Cruz to adjourn. Seconded by Commissioner White. **Adopted 4-0, with concurrence of parent representative.**

Meeting adjourned at 8:21PM.