

Rochester Board of Education
Finance Committee Meeting of the Whole
April 21, 2011

MINUTES

Attendance: Commissioner Powell (Chair) and Commissioners Cruz, Campos, and Elliott (joined at 7:19PM). Commissioner Williams joined the meeting via skype. Commissioners White and Evans absent.

District Staff: John Scanlan, Joyce Martelli, Vern Connors, and Beth Mascitti-Miller.

Board Staff: Debra Flanagan

Commissioner Powell convened the meeting at 6:54 p.m.

Commissioner Cruz discussed the confusion and consternation in the community regarding the proposed budget, and also commended the degree of civic engagement in Rochester regarding issues in education. He emphasized the importance of providing supports to students to stay in school and be successful, which requires going beyond just the core courses and providing programs that appeal to students such as music and art. He noted that many students at the public budget hearings have described the significance of music and art in enhancing their motivation, participation, and achievement in school. Commissioner Cruz stated that the Board relies on the community to provide input regarding their concerns and priorities, and has the responsibility for making sound decisions. He described the direction that the majority of Board members have chosen regarding the proposed FY2011-12 budget for the District:

- Examine school choice guidelines and zone boundaries to identify transportation cost savings that can be realized from strengthening the zone boundaries.
- Reduce RCSD centralized administrative services expenditures by at least 20%, which would include Central Office, Hart Street, and 690 St. Paul.

John Scanlan inquired whether the Board was directing the Administration to cut these expenses by an additional 5%, as the budget already contains a 15% reduction.

Commissioner Cruz replied that the Board will need data to demonstrate that these expenses have been reduced by 20%.

- Eliminate funding for the Gateway to College program, and reduce funding for the Hillside Work Scholarship program by 50%, for a total of \$600K in FY2011-12.
- Conduct an audit by an independent third-party auditing firm to determine the size of the budget gap. Commissioner Cruz stated that while the Board has confidence in the expertise of the District's finance and budgeting staff, an independent audit is necessary to address the breach of trust in the community and with the bargaining units. He stated that timing is an issue because the deadline for submitting the RCSD budget to the City is rapidly approaching. Commissioner Cruz reported that the Board is prepared to move forward with

the current budget figures, and to make amendments as needed after the findings are provided by the independent auditor.

- Obtain collaboration of the bargaining units in identifying cost savings so that at least a minimal presence of librarians, art, music, and physical education can be retained in every school. Commissioner Cruz stated that obtaining the assistance of the bargaining units is the purpose for calling for an independent third-party audit and reductions in administrative costs by at least 20%. He emphasized that the cooperation of the bargaining units is essential in keeping cuts away from the classroom as much as possible.

Commissioner Cruz reported that these recommendations are supported also by Commissioners White, Evans, and Campos.

Commissioner Campos requested information regarding the specific programs and initiatives that are funded through Foundation Aid and the General Fund, as these are discretionary and indicate where cuts can be made.

Commissioner Powell thanked her colleagues for their efforts in developing a consensus plan, and requested their consideration of a number of other cost saving proposals:

- Reduce funding for professional development (proposed for over \$3m in 2011-12) in view of the significant number of layoffs
- Consider closure of the following schools:
 - ❖ School No. 36 – Commissioner Powell stated that continued support for this school cannot be justified on any measure, from facilities to student achievement.
 - ❖ School No. 57 – Commissioner Powell pointed out that this school only consists of grades K through 2, and therefore has a lot of administrative overhead. She proposed that this school be moved to another school that has excess capacity. She stated that moving the school would reduce facilities and utility costs.
 - ❖ Montessori School at Franklin – Commissioner Powell stated that parents are not choosing this model, and vacancies can only be filled by students who have been in a Montessori program. She reported that there are few students in grades 3-5 and this has led to costly and inefficient operations.

Commissioner Powell cautioned that budget cuts will only deepen in future years because of the District's structural deficit. For this reason, she emphasized the need for cost reductions that will be permanent rather than relying on a one-time concession or savings. On this basis, she questioned the potential benefit of asking for concessions from bargaining units.

Commissioner Williams asked about proposed cuts in staffing within the Superintendent Employee Group (SEG) and the Board Employee Group (BEG). Commissioner Powell stated that discussions regarding reductions in Board staff would have to be conducted with the Board President.

John Scanlan replied that a 20% reduction for SEG has been incorporated into the proposed budget.

Commissioner Williams asked where the 20% cost reduction for SEG is accounted in the budget, as there are no proposed reductions in headcount.

Action Item: Mr. Scanlan will provide information to the Board as to the specific sources of the 20% funding reductions for SEG.

Superintendent Brizard stated that 2.0FTE are proposed to be cut from the Office of Human Capital Initiatives and 1.0FTE from the front office, for a total of 3.0FTE from SEG.

Commissioner Powell asked about the nine administrative positions to support Race to the Top. Beth Mascitti-Miller replied that these positions are included in the Teaching & Learning section of the budget. Commissioner Powell expressed concern that these nine administrative positions are funded in the budget, even though the District has not yet received Race to the Top funds. She stated that these District funds are therefore unavailable until Race to the Top money has been provided. Ms. Mascitti-Miller replied that these positions will not be filled until Race to the Top funds have been received.

Commissioner Elliott questioned continued funding for reforms and initiatives begun under the current Administration, since the Superintendent will be leaving at the end of the school year. She expressed concern about the funds and number of staff involved in supporting these initiatives, particularly without the Superintendent's leadership.

Commissioner Powell stated that the Board could review their support for these initiatives generally, rather than in the context of budget discussions. She advised Commissioner Elliott to address this question with the Board President.

Commissioner Williams asked a series of questions about updated program information:

- Discrepancies in the figures for total benefits compared to salaries for staff in the Elementary Long-Term Suspension program
- Concern about significantly greater expenditures for the Alternative School program compared to highly effective programs such as IB and Middle Years. Commissioner Williams acknowledged that the Alternative School serves students with significant needs, but also at a cost of \$6,000 to \$7,000 per student. By contrast, he stated that the IB program costs \$490 per student and attains a 100% graduation rate. He questioned the rationale for the District providing disproportionately less support for more cost-effective programs.

Vern Connors stated that the proposed expenditures for the IB program do not include administrative or classroom teacher costs, while these costs are included for the Alternate School program. He explained that the program-based budget reflects costs above and beyond that for a standard classroom, but the Alternate School program is not classroom-based and therefore the total costs are reported.

Commissioner Williams asked how much of the \$2.2m proposed for the On-Campus Intervention program (OCIP) is for RCSD staff and how much for outside agencies. Mr.

Connors replied that the salaries total is for RCSD staff (approximately \$1.2m) and the “Supplies” category reflects expenditures for outside agencies (approximately \$1m).

Commissioner Williams questioned the necessity for obtaining services through outside agencies. Ms. Mascitti-Miller replied that the Center for Youth has expertise to reduce suspension rates and address the needs of these students to enable them to return to the classroom.

Commissioner Williams noted that the data do not indicate that the OCIP program is effective: 1% of elementary students suspended in the program v. 2.2% for the District; 12.1% of secondary students suspended in the program v. 17.2% for the District; and no difference in the percentage of students passing ELA 3-8. He questioned the benefits of this program and the rationale for continued funding at \$2.2m in 2011-12.

Action Item: Ms. Mascitti-Miller will provide additional data to the Board regarding the On-Campus Intervention Program and program outcomes.

Commissioner Campos pointed out that the breakdown of proposed staffing reductions indicates significant cuts for ESOL teachers, yet the Administration has repeatedly stated that there is a shortage of these teachers. She noted the influx of immigrants to Rochester as increasing the need for ESOL in the foreseeable future, and questioned the rationale for reducing these staff. Ms. Mascitti-Miller replied that adjustments will be made as the budget is finalized. Ms. Martelli stated that funding and staffing adjustments will be made according to actual enrollment in September.

Commissioner Campos stated that School No. 12 lost their social worker last year, and the proposed budget would eliminate the Strong Start program in the school. She questioned the rationale for eliminating these cost-effective preventive services. Mr. Scanlan responded that schools had the option to sustain the Strong Start program as part of their overall funding package. He stated that approximately \$774K will be added to school allocations as a result of the restoration of approximately \$3.4m in NYS Aid, which amounts to approximately \$25 per student. Mr. Scanlan asserted that efforts will be made to target preventive and safety net programs in the future possibly by providing funding centrally, but school-based budgeting precludes this for 2011-12.

Commissioner Campos inquired about decisions regarding “locked” v. “unlocked” funding, which could be used to support preventive programs – particularly if these programs are not voluntarily selected by school principals. Mr. Scanlan replied that principals are able to make resource allocation decisions more effectively according to the needs of their student population.

Commissioner Powell contended that the \$76m budget deficit and consequent implications for schools only allow the core mission of the District to be funded, regardless of program effectiveness. She proposed eliminating elementary summer school because of the questionable return on the \$1.8m expended and the need to identify \$8m in cost savings to cover the restoration of librarians, music and art in the schools.

Commissioner Powell expressed concern regarding proposed funding cuts for the School Without Walls (SWW), noting that this school does not have a sports team, librarian, or Food Services. Since these functions are supported through “locked” funds and SWW has reduced these expenses, she asserted that consideration must be given to supporting their unique educational program. Mr. Scanlan stated that discussions were held with all school principals regarding the implications of not using “locked” funds. He contended that if SWW had a plan in place to develop a library, funding would be provided as for any other school.

Commissioner Powell stated that equitable funding should enable a school to trade “locked” funds (e.g. for extracurricular sports, Food Services) for funds to support its core mission. Mr. Scanlan replied that funds are “locked” on the basis of economies of scale and centralization of functions. He stated that since SWW does not incur these costs now, additional allocations would have to be taken from the General Fund. Commissioner Powell declared that special consideration must be given to schools that have operated differently in the past. She stated that by not having a sports team, cafeteria, or library, the SWW has reduced District costs in the past and this should be considered in their funding allocations. Mr. Scanlan replied that SWW will receive a portion of the \$1-1.5m additional funds to be allocated to the schools.

Commissioner Powell asked whether consideration will be given to changing the “locked” v. “unlocked” funds arrangement. Mr. Scanlan stated that this is not under consideration at this time. Commissioner Powell asserted that design differences in schools support their unique mission and student population (e.g. Career and Technical Education, IB). She questioned how schools with unique programs can be supported under equitable student funding. Mr. Scanlan acknowledged that unique programs must be supported over and above equitable student funding (ESF), so an additional District initiative budget allocation was provided to these schools. He explained that a school must demonstrate that additional expenses are incurred as a result of their unique program.

Commissioner Powell noted that the model for School No. 15 for the last 50 years has been to promote diversity through having 50% ELL students and 50% of students based on city-wide choice. She expressed concern that the budget compromises the school’s mission by attempting to re-distribute the ELL population to other schools, and urged the Administration to reconsider. Ms. Mascitti-Miller replied that she will speak with the school community in light of their concerns, but the ELL student population is being equalized among schools due to accountability measures that jeopardize school performance. She noted that the NYS Education Department is pressuring school districts to distribute ELL and Special Education students more equally among schools. Commissioner Powell stated that School No. 15 is willing to assume the risk of lower performance on accountability measures, and there is maximum opportunity to raise English proficiency and performance on NYS assessments in this school because the ELL students typically start in kindergarten. She asserted that there is no comparison between a school that has intentionally cultivated a mission to educate ELL students and a school which just happened to receive a disproportionate number of these students.

Commissioner Williams asked whether School No. 15 has been cited for poor performance on NYS assessments due to a high concentration of ELL students. Ms. Mascitti-Miller

replied that assessment is only one measure of accountability, and the concern is about compromising educational quality due to the high concentration of students with special needs.

Motion by Commissioner Campos to recess until the next scheduled Finance Committee Meeting of the Whole on Monday, April 25th. Seconded by Commissioner Cruz. **Adopted 4-0.**

Meeting adjourned at 8:40PM.

Next Finance Committee Meeting of the Whole: April 25th, immediately following the Board Work Session