

ROCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION
Community & Intergovernmental Relations
Committee Meeting

March 17, 2015

MINUTES

Attending: Board Vice President Cynthia Elliott (Chair); Commissioners Adams, Campos, and White (arrived 6:42PM).

Parent Representatives: Felix Jacobs

District Staff: Ed Lopez-Soto, General Counsel; Mike Schmidt, Chief of School Operations; Wayne Kittelberger, Assistant Transportation Director; Maria Mello-Dupre, Transportation Director; Adele Bovard, Deputy Superintendent of Administration; and Dr. Christiana Otuwa, Deputy Superintendent for Teaching & Learning.

Board Staff: Debra Flanagan

Board Vice President Elliott called the meeting to order at 6:02PM.

I. Review of the Minutes of the February 10, 2015 CIGR Meeting of the Whole

Motion by Commissioner Campos to approve the minutes of the February 10, 2015 CIGR meeting. Seconded by Commissioner Adams. **Adopted 3-0, with concurrence of Parent Representative.**

II. Update on the Status of Federal Legislation, including the “All Children Are Equal” Act

Commissioner Elliott thanked Katie Condello for attending this evening’s meeting, noting that Ms. Condello is the Community Services Liaison for Congresswoman Louise Slaughter. She referred to the legislative updates regarding pending federal education legislation, and requested Ms. Condello provide information as to the current status of these bills. Commissioner Elliott pointed out that an important bill sponsored by Congresswoman Slaughter is currently under consideration in Congress, the “All Children Are Equal” Act, which would increase funding to the Rochester City School District under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

Ms. Condello explained that the “All Children Are Equal” Act is a bipartisan bill that has been introduced in each consecutive Congressional session since 2011. She stated that the bill was sponsored by Congresswoman Slaughter, and would rectify unintended negative consequences of the current Title I formula. Ms. Condello clarified that the current formula diverts funding from higher poverty districts to more populous districts – regardless of whether the populous districts have a high percentage of students in poverty. She reported

that Rochester, Buffalo, and Syracuse school districts are in the top ten districts nationwide that would benefit from this proposed change to the Title I formula because these districts have been shortchanged the most under the current formula. Ms. Condello stated that the current formula provides disproportionate funding to suburban school districts with large student populations, to the detriment of high-need urban districts with a large percentage of students in poverty. She estimated that the Rochester City School District would gain an additional \$10M over the next three years if the “All Children Are Equal” Act is passed, beginning in federal fiscal year 2015.

Ms. Condello provided handout materials to Committee members: an overview of the “All Children Are Equal” Act, and the text of the bill.

Commissioner Elliott inquired as to the likelihood of the “All Children Are Equal” Act being approved by Congress. Ms. Condello responded that the outlook for enactment of this bill is grim because the U.S. House and U.S. Senate have been gridlocked in terms of any re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which has been due for over a decade.

Ms. Condello also reported on the current status of a number of other bills in Congress:

- The “Student Success Act” (HR 5) has been completely stalled because of opposition by the U.S. Senate and the Obama administration. Ms. Condello explained that this bill would allow all Title I funding to follow the student, which would create a great deal of fiscal instability for many school districts. She stated that RCSD would experience a reduction in Title I funds under this bill of approximately \$500K per year.
- Because of Congressional gridlock, Ms. Condello reported that the most likely scenario is that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act will simply be extended, rather than revised and re-authorized.

Commissioner Elliott asked about effective ways in which Rochester Board of Education members can support the “All Children Are Equal” Act. Ms. Condello replied that Board members can contact other members of the U.S. House of Representatives in Monroe County (e.g. Chris Collins and Tom Reed); send a letter of support; and encourage parents to contact their legislators to support the bill. She noted that all school districts in Monroe County would benefit from the funding formula change under the “All Children Are Equal” Act.

Commissioner Elliott stated that the Rochester Board of Education can at least send a letter of support for this legislation.

Action Item: A letter of support for the “All Children Are Equal” Act will be drafted for review by the Community & Intergovernmental Relations Committee.

III. Update regarding the Status of Safety Initiatives Downtown

Commissioner Elliott pointed out that a number of initiatives were recommended in the February 10, 2015 Community & Intergovernmental Relations Committee Meeting of the Whole for improving safety downtown, specifically in the Transit Center. She referred to the minutes of the February 10th meeting, and asked RCSD staff members for an update regarding these recommended initiatives.

Mike Schmidt reported that student behavior has improved throughout the transportation system, and commended the efforts of Lori Baldwin, Director of RCSD Safety & Security, and her staff. He also commended Maria Mello-Dupre and Wayne Kittelberger for their work in collaborating with RTS to identify changes in routes to prevent/minimize opportunities for students to become involved in disturbances downtown and to identify students causing disturbances to hold them accountable.

Mr. Schmidt discussed five main initiatives that have been implemented in the last month to address safety issues downtown:

1. Students wearing bus passes so that they are visible to security personnel:
 - Lanyards have been provided to students in all schools to enable display of bus passes
 - Students have been directed to visibly display their bus pass
 - RTS bus drivers have been instructed to ask students to display their bus pass so that it is visible
2. The Assistant Transportation Director has been collaborating with staff at RTS to obtain data to provide to school principals to enable them to identify students causing trouble. Mr. Kittelberger has been at the Transit Center on a regular basis at least once a week, and as needed.
3. RCSD administrators have been a consistent presence at the Transit Center, which has served as a deterrent for students and enabled RCSD administrators to develop working relationships with RTS staff and RPD officers. Mr. Schmidt reported that he, Mr. Kittelberger, Lori Baldwin and her team have been at the Transit Center on a regular basis over the last month.
4. Lori Baldwin and her team of Safety & Security staff have been at the Transit Center at critical times to lend support to RTS and RPD security personnel: in the morning and after school.
5. The routes travelled by secondary students have typically been determined by RTS, with the District simply providing the students' names and the addresses to which they are travelling. Mr. Schmidt explained that these routes are also open to the public, and therefore are not able to be changed very often in response to incidents involving students (i.e. once every three months at most).

Mr. Schmidt reported that RTS officials have begun to recognize that the lack of flexibility in routing student transportation is not meeting the needs of students or the larger community. He stated that Ms. Mello-Dupre has been working extensive hours and diligently to ensure that RTS has the information needed to determine route changes. Mr. Schmidt added that the route adjustments will take effect on Thursday, March 19th, and these changes have been communicated in letters to parents of the students that have been affected by the RTS re-routing.

In terms of school schedules and student transportation needs for the 2015-16 school year, Mr. Schmidt stated that most of this information will be provided to RTS by April 1, 2015 to facilitate development of student transportation routes.

Commissioner Elliott pointed out that Rochester Police Chief Ciminelli had recommended having School Safety Officers (SSOs) observe and assist police officers at the Transit Center. She asked whether SSOs have been assigned to work at the Transit Center on a regular, permanent basis. Mr. Schmidt stated that his discussions with Ms. Baldwin did not seem to indicate that this would be a permanent or long-term plan.

Commissioner Elliott recalled that RPD Chief Ciminelli had recommended having SSOs work with police officers one to two times per month on an ongoing basis to “puncture” students’ anonymity and thereby deter them from becoming involved in disturbances. She asked whether the Superintendent is supportive of having SSOs at the Transit Center on an ongoing basis one to two times per month. Deputy Superintendent Adele Bovard replied that further conversation is needed to determine the timeline for having SSOs stationed at the Transit Center, and added that one to two times per month seems feasible.

Commissioner Elliott emphasized the need to address safety concerns in a systemic way and on a long-term basis. For this reason, she stated that the SSOs need to be stationed at the Transit Center one to two times per month on an ongoing basis.

Commissioner Adams inquired whether the SSOs that have been stationed at the Transit Center are being deployed from schools, or paid overtime for additional work hours. Deputy Superintendent Bovard responded that the District has provided SSOs from the mobile unit and also selectively deployed staff from schools.

Commissioner Campos suggested assessing the effectiveness of stationing SSOs at the Transit Center at the end of the school year to ensure that this arrangement is having a positive impact on safety before committing to it on a more permanent basis. She stated that this assessment is also important in light of the District’s anticipated budget constraints in 2015-16.

Mr. Lopez-Soto reported that the Superintendent supports continuing to have SSOs downtown to collaborate with RPD and RTS security staff through the end of the school year, and then assessing the effectiveness of this approach. He cautioned that once the District begins assuming the obligation of protecting students and

preventing incidents involving students downtown at the Transit Center, the District will be legally liable to provide this service.

Felix Jacobs noted that the Rochester City School District has created a transportation structure that requires students involved in after-school activities to transfer buses downtown, and it is the District's responsibility to ensure their safety.

Mr. Lopez-Soto objected to this statement, asserting that it is not the District's responsibility to ensure students' safety in the community.

Mr. Jacobs inquired about time limits on the bus passes issued to students. Mr. Schmidt replied that the time limits vary according to the type of bus pass, but basically allow students enough time to transfer buses downtown. He noted that the student's responsibility is based on the reason that they were issued their particular type of bus pass (e.g. express pass, pass based on participation in extracurricular activities, etc.).

Mr. Jacobs stated that he would like to recommend to parents that they find out the time limit for the bus pass issued to their child, so that parents are aware of the expectations, opportunities and options available. Mr. Schmidt replied that providing more detailed information to parents of their child's transportation arrangements will help support/supplement the District's efforts to improve safety. He noted that many parents are under the misconception that an express pass will not allow their child to get off of the bus downtown, but students can get off of RTS buses whenever and wherever they choose. Students have the opportunity to get off a bus at one location and get on another bus a little later because there are multiple buses on the same route. Mr. Schmidt stated that informing parents of the intricacies of the transportation system enables them to work with RCSD staff to ensure their children's safety.

Commissioner Adams inquired whether certain areas of the Transit Center are off limits to RCSD staff. Mr. Schmidt replied that RCSD staff interact with students in the foyer of the Transit Center, but do not take the place of RTS security personnel. He stated that RCSD Safety & Security staff (SSOs) serve as advisors by identifying individual students and reporting potential problems to enable RTS security staff to manage the situation.

Commissioner Adams asked whether RCSD staff would be able to access other areas of the RTS transportation system, such as boarding a bus if a student was seen causing a disturbance. Mr. Schmidt pointed out that access and authorization are different for RCSD administrators than for Safety & Security staff because of their different roles and responsibilities. He stated that SSOs are teamed with police officers and RTS security staff, whereas RCSD administrators are at the Transit Center to interact with students and obtain information to identify those causing trouble so that they can be held accountable by the school administration the

following day. Mr. Schmidt emphasized that a very, very small number of RCSD students have been involved in disturbances.

Commissioner Elliott stated that even a small number of students can draw a large crowd, which only exacerbates the situation. Mr. Schmidt noted that early intervention is critical in preventing situations from escalating to this point because this is when people get hurt.

Mr. Schmidt noted that sharing of intelligence is a critical aspect of safety measures, whether on school grounds or in the transportation system. He asserted that safety has improved markedly over the last few months.

Commissioner Elliott inquired about the reduced number/percentage of RCSD students travelling through the Transit Center as a result of re-routing. Ms. Mello-Dupre explained the difficulty of estimating the impact of re-routing because information is only available regarding the students traveling downtown for legitimate reasons and for whom the District has issued specific types of bus passes. She pointed out that the actual number of students downtown at any given time *without* the District's authorization is unknown. Ms. Mello-Dupre reported that approximately 500 passes have been issued to RCSD students who have a legitimate need to travel through the downtown corridor, but this figure does not necessarily reflect the actual number of students downtown at any given time.

Commissioner Elliott asked about the number of students taking RTS buses for school transportation. Ms. Mello-Dupre replied that approximately 9,000 students currently use RTS bus transportation.

Commissioner White thanked those involved in collaborating to resolve this issue: Commissioner Elliott, Superintendent Vargas, RGRTA CEO Bill Carpenter, Mayor Warren, and staff from RCSD, RTS and RPD. He asserted that this type of collaboration presents a model approach to addressing the larger issues in this community.

Commissioner White referred to the increasing use of social media, noting that there has been a proliferation of videos posted to Facebook. He reported that many of these videos depict kids engaging in violent activities, and treating it as a sport. Commissioner White emphasized the importance of discussing these disturbing trends and the proliferation of violence among youth, noting that these attitudes toward violence begin at home. He contended that these issues have to be addressed among parents and as a community to confront the source of violence.

Commissioner Elliott recalled that the discussion in last month's meeting included opportunities for parents to become involved in improving downtown safety, and asked about the current status of this proposal. Mr. Jacobs reported that the RPD Lieutenant will meet with RCSD parents within the next few weeks, and parents will then go downtown for a tour of the Transit Center. He explained that the intent is

for parents to assist in identifying students causing trouble downtown at that facility.

IV. Discuss Goals for 2015 for the Community & Intergovernmental Relations Committee

Commissioner Elliott asked her colleagues for suggestions of goals for the Committee for 2015. She stated that she would like to develop a communications plan for the Board to discuss issues affecting the District (e.g. Common Core, transportation), noting the importance of having a systemic structure for communicating with the community.

Commissioner Elliott referred to a communications plan that was developed in 2010 by Debra Flanagan, Executive Assistant to the Board. She asked Committee members to review this plan to identify strategies that may be useful to the Board at this point. Commissioner Elliott also suggested conducting meetings in each of the four quadrants of the City to provide information to the community.

Commissioner Adams commented that the communications plan developed by Ms. Flanagan in 2010 seems to be a useful starting point.

Mr. Jacobs pointed out that the majority of parents use social media, and public access television station (Channel 46) is available to parents without cable television service. He suggested using these channels for communicating to parents.

In terms of topics to present to the community, Commissioner Adams suggested giving a presentation regarding the importance of 9th grade to later academic success.

Commissioner Elliott requested that Committee members submit their suggestions for a communications plan or 2015 goals to Ms. Flanagan or herself.

Mr. Lopez-Soto suggested that the Board advocate to obtain support from NYS Assemblyman Gantt and NYS Senator Robach for the bill that would reduce the distance limit for providing transportation to RCSD students. He reported that a foundation will cover any additional costs incurred for the first year, so the initial phase of this pilot project will not lead the District to incur any additional costs. Mr. Lopez-Soto stated that the new transportation structure will break even if at least 25% of District parents select neighborhood schools. He asserted that the District could realize \$5-12M in cost savings if 50% of parents select neighborhood schools.

Commissioner Adams inquired whether these cost savings estimates are based on K-6 or K-8 schools. Mr. Lopez-Soto replied that this is based on K-8 schools because the majority of 7th and 8th grade students currently take yellow buses. He offered to provide a copy of the presentation shown to NYS legislators to the Committee members.

Action Item: Mr. Lopez-Soto will provide a copy to members of the CIGR Committee of the presentation shown to NYS legislators regarding the impact of reducing the distance limits for providing transportation to RCSD students, including estimates of cost savings.

V. Legislative Updates

Commissioner Elliott referred to the updates of legislation pending in Congress and at the state level, which have been included with the agenda for each monthly meeting of the CIGR Committee. She noted that one of the items pertains to eliminating the Gap Elimination Adjustment, and requested additional information.

Deputy Superintendent Bovard explained that the 2008 recession led to challenges for the State in balancing its budget, so a “Gap Elimination Adjustment” was created. This adjustment involved establishing a formula to calculate the amount/percentage by which NYS Aid would be reduced for each school district. Ms. Bovard reported that RCSD has lost \$125M in NYS Aid over the last three years due to the Gap Elimination Adjustment. She noted that as a result of recent economic recovery, many school districts are calling for elimination of the Gap Elimination Adjustment as no longer being necessary. Deputy Superintendent Bovard discussed a recent letter of support signed by eighteen superintendents in Monroe County, calling for repeal of the Gap Elimination Adjustment.

Commissioner Elliott inquired about the reason that Superintendent Vargas did not sign this letter of support, particularly since he was the only superintendent in Monroe County not to do so. Deputy Superintendent Bovard replied that RCSD not only needs the Gap Elimination Adjustment to be terminated, but also the original NYS Foundation Aid formula to be restored. She surmised that this was the reason that Superintendent Vargas did not sign the letter of support.

Commissioner Elliott referred to a bill in the NYS legislature regarding chronically under-performing schools, and asked about the probable designation for RCSD under this proposed legislation. Deputy Superintendent Bovard responded that the District can vigorously defend RCSD schools and the actions taken to improve student achievement. She discussed inaccuracies in the Governor’s report of “failing schools”, such as references to schools that are closed or in the process of closing (e.g. School No. 30 and Dr. Freddie Thomas High School). Deputy Superintendent Bovard noted that objective indicators show recent improvement, and four schools are anticipated to be removed from priority status.

Dr. Otuwa added that the Teaching & Learning Division has been collaborating with Commissioner Adams to examine the curriculum and ways to structure interventions to improve support for students reading below grade level.

Commissioner Elliott asked which stage the District would be considered at this point under this proposed legislation: Stage One or Stage Two. She explained that Stage One refers to school districts that have been designated Focus Districts for at least three school years, and Stage Two refers to school districts with this designation for at least eight school years. Deputy Superintendent Bovard replied that the District has at least four schools that

have been designated priority schools for ten years, which has led RCSD to be designated a Focus District. She reported that action has been taken on these four priority schools, such as closing Dr. Freddie Thomas High School and obtaining an educational partnership with the University of Rochester for East High School. Deputy Superintendent Bovard asserted that the District needs to vigorously defend schools and present a more comprehensive view of the actions taken to improve schools. She noted that District staff have been diligent in preparing plans for improvement: the School Comprehensive Education Plans for each priority and focus school, and recent revision of the District Comprehensive Education Plan. Deputy Superintendent Bovard assured that the District will be prepared if this legislation is approved because the plans are already in place with measurable goals that are being monitored.

Dr. Otuwa reported that formative assessments are also available to inform District staff of students' needs and of the supports to be provided to each priority and focus school.

Mr. Lopez-Soto pointed out that the District has been identified at the state level for at least the last two years as potentially eligible for a Distinguished Educator to recommend improvements. He reported speaking with NYS Assemblyman Morelle, who stated that he did not think that this bill would be approved.

Commissioner White stated that this bill reflects the Governor's agenda to attempt to reform education, but does not reflect the intent of the NYS legislature. He noted that this legislation is not reflected in either the NYS Assembly or NYS Senate budget bills. Commissioner White concurred with Deputy Superintendent Bovard and Dr. Otuwa regarding the importance of monitoring and preparing for actions that may be taken at the state level. He pointed out that the Board and the Administration are currently using data in the Finish Line Reports, Pipeline Report, and Striking Distance Report to monitor the status of each school's progress. Commissioner White noted that the Striking Distance Report identifies the schools most likely to be removed from priority or focus status.

Commissioner Adams commented on the Governor's agenda and the inherent funding instability from competitively awarding grants to support initiatives for only a few years, after which the initiatives are discontinued. She contended that this model does not allow problems to be addressed systemically.

Commissioner White concurred with Commissioner Adams, noting that performance is the best defense against this type of strategy. He acknowledged that emphasizing performance outcomes leads to reliance on test scores to some extent, but pointed out that RCSD graduation rates are also unnecessarily low. Commissioner White contended that poverty cannot explain the abysmal performance of the District over the last several decades.

Commissioner White emphasized that by incorporating this bill into the proposed State budget, the Governor is essentially using the legislation as a budgetary strategy: school districts will not receive funding unless a number of conditions are accepted (e.g. mayoral control, receivership). He pointed out that this type of legislation can be introduced at any time, even if it is not approved as part of the Governor's budget package. For this reason,

Commissioner White noted that the District must be monitoring and promoting performance at all times.

Commissioner White also discussed some common misconceptions about the current status of RCSD schools, particularly East High School. He stated that the news media incorrectly reported that the principals of East High School had to be approved by the NYS Education Department. Commissioner White explained that the principals of East High School do not have to be approved at the state level because the school is not in receivership. He added that the new superintendent of the school is the University of Rochester, which has all of the same duties and responsibilities with respect to East High School as Superintendent Vargas has with respect all of the other District schools.

Commissioner Elliott stated that she supports the Governor's agenda because of the urgency of the situation and the need for substantial improvement in District schools.

VI. Miscellaneous

Commissioner Elliott referred to handout materials regarding NYS budget priorities for the big five school districts, which reflect the legislative advocacy conducted during Lobby Days hosted by the Office of the Big Five.

Commissioner Elliott announced that individuals will be invited to attend upcoming CIGR Committee meetings to address ways in which the Board can effectively advocate for items on the 2015 Legislative Agenda. She stated that invitations will be extended to the following individuals:

- April 14th meeting: Kathleen Saville, Grants Director – strategies for advocating for grant funding at the federal and state level
Erin Graupman, Director of Health-E-Access telemedicine program
- May 19th meeting: Kelly Reed, Commissioner of the Monroe County Department of Human Services – to discuss ways in which eligibility for public assistance can be linked to improved student attendance

Motion by Commissioner Campos to adjourn. Seconded by Commissioner Adams.
Adopted 3-0, with concurrence of the Parent Representative.

Meeting adjourned at 7:23PM.