February 28, 2020

Statement by The Children’s Agenda on the Restructuring of Pre-K at RCSD

The Rochester City School District (RCSD) Board of Education has approved a shift of as many as 500 Pre-K slots from existing neighborhood providers into two district-run schools starting next school year by a 5-2 vote. We applaud Commissioners LeBron and Elliott for opposing the plan and standing up for a more cautious and thoughtful approach. Now it is critically important to maximize potential benefits to children and families and minimize any potential harm.

RCSD should immediately establish a Board-Staff-Community Task Force to develop a comprehensive Pre-K and early elementary enrollment plan.

Who provides pre-K, community-based organizations (CBOs) or RCSD, was never the central concern of The Children’s Agenda. All the data shows that both RCSD and the CBOs are quality providers, equally deserving credit for making our Pre-K system a unique bright spot. The Children’s Agenda would be sympathetic to this reorganization if the School Board had been forced to do it out of necessity rather than choice, or made it to reduce District expenses rather than raise them, or focused on expanding Pre-K slots for children rather than merely changing who provides them.

There were only 35 days between when this major restructuring was introduced to yesterday when it was adopted. RCSD now has a heightened responsibility to publicly report out data and information regarding the major questions we have been asking since the beginning:

- Parent and community engagement: RCSD consulted with parents at School 44 and 57, but not the hundreds of other parents and community stakeholders who will be affected by this proposal. How will RCSD learn from those families how to best maximize the benefits to them and minimize any harm from reducing the geographic options available to them for Pre-K?
- Cost: in a time of fiscal crisis, the District has said that this decision will cost at least $700,000 more. But what’s the total when adding in the costs to convert School 44 and School 57 to pre-K only centers, adding wrap-around care, and providing bus passes?
- State regulation: since RCSD’s Pre-K offerings will now be regulated for the first time by the New York State Office of Children & Family Services, and since OCFS has indicated RCSD may already owe a $600,000 fine for its existing Pre-K center, what is the plan to deal with the new regulations for facilities and personnel?
- Pre-K enrollment: what is the net impact of switching locations on total Pre-K enrollment in the city? Compared to this year’s baseline and trends, did the switch cause an uptick or decline in Pre-K enrollment?
• Transition to K-12: the entire justification for this switch is that it will help RCSD raise its K-12 enrollment. How will the Pre-K centers work with the managed school choice policy to ease enrollment into K-12 District schools? Long-term, what do the numbers say about whether or not this change improved K-12 enrollment?

Once again, RCSD should move immediately to establish a Board-Staff-Community Task Force to develop a comprehensive Pre-K and early elementary enrollment plan. For several years, The Children’s Agenda has called for better coordination between Pre-K and Kindergarten. Better coordination includes developmentally appropriate curriculum, placement policy decisions, and building utilization. We believe RCSD should seek to locate more Pre-K classrooms in district elementary schools rather than standalone centers, and school placement stability should be a key weighted factor within a managed choice policy.

The Children’s Agenda does not provide any direct services or take government funding. Our interest in this matter is solely about what children need most and what works best. Our community needs to turn its attention away from the interests of institutions and leaders to ensure that we put kids first in every decision moving forward.