

## Why RCSD's School Board Should Develop a More Inclusive and Comprehensive Plan to Restructure Pre-Kindergarten

February 24, 2020

The Children's Agenda is deeply concerned by the proposal to shift 500 Pre-K slots from community-based organizations (CBOs) to district schools in the 2020-21 school year. We urge the Rochester City School District Board of Commissioners to separate the issue of closing schools 44 and 57 from this Pre-K proposal, table the Pre-K proposal for next year, engage the community in a thoughtful planning process about both Pre-K and the transition from Pre-K into Kindergarten, and develop a more detailed and responsive plan for the 2021-22 school year.

Rochester's mixed delivery Pre-K model is designed to be responsive to the needs of families with young children, is nationally recognized for quality, and has adapted to overcome some of the limitations of state education funding. The Superintendent's proposal will close many Pre-K classrooms that are already successful and thriving, and will disrupt the daily life plans of hundreds of Rochester families.

After reviewing RCSD's plan, consulting with community stakeholders and national experts, and analyzing available data, we have concluded that there are too many unanswered questions about cost, wrap-around care, transportation, program disruption, facility readiness, and parent choice to move forward with this plan on February 27th. Furthermore, we believe moving forward with this plan under these circumstances is a missed opportunity to develop a more strategic plan for Pre-K and Kindergarten enrollment.

Specifically, we are concerned that the Pre-K proposal:

- Costs more than it saves
- May not positively affect RCSD enrollment
- Was developed without any parent or community input

The Children's Agenda recommends that the RCSD School Board:

- Separate the decision to close School 57 and School 44 from the decision to shift 25% of CBO Pre-K slots into district schools
- Determine whether or not to close those two schools on their own merits, given the savings
- Table the decision to open two new Pre-K centers
- Establish a Board-Staff-Community Task Force to develop a comprehensive Pre-K and early elementary enrollment plan by January, 2021
- Petition the Mayor and the Rochester City Council to delay any real estate decisions about the fate of School 57 and School 44 until April, 2021

This paper is intended to outline a few of our major concerns about the proposed plan, demonstrate why it is unnecessary to move forward under the proposed timeline, and propose an alternate plan that prioritizes community engagement and better aligns with future changes to the district's placement policy.

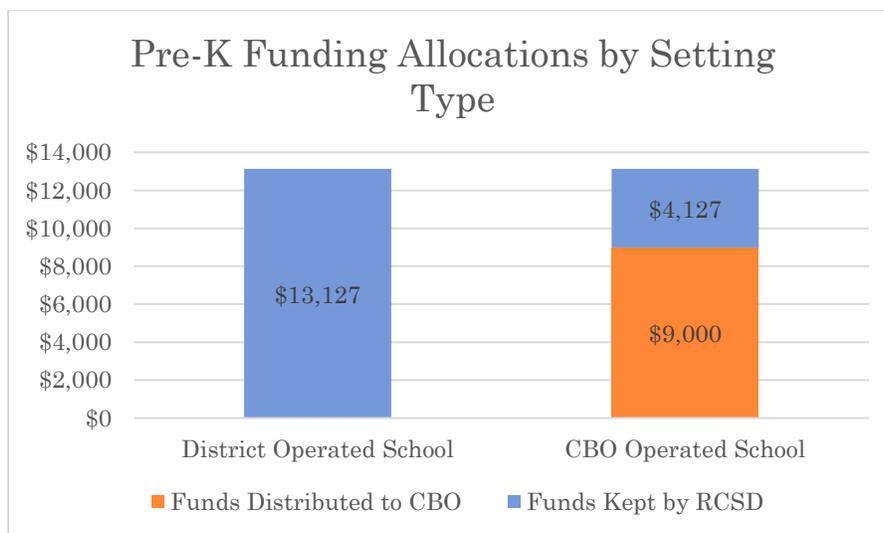
## Concern 1: The Pre-K Proposal Costs More Than It Saves

RCSD is in the midst of an unprecedented budget crisis, and the need to identify additional revenue and savings is warranted and urgent. However, by the district's own admission, the shift of hundreds of slots from community based partners to district schools will not save any money, and appears to actually cost significantly more than the current arrangement.

### Pre-K Funding Model and Projected Expense to RCSD

Pre-K at RCSD is funded through annual grants from New York State. These funds are restricted to the Pre-K program, and cannot be used to offset K-12 expenses or pay for non-Pre-K related administrative costs. The district can, however, contract with community-based organizations to provide services. RCSD has received many state funded expansions in Pre-K over the past two decades, and frequently turns to CBO partners to add Pre-K capacity. According to RCSD, CBOs currently serve approximately 61% of all Pre-K students in the district.

RCSD receives \$13,127 from New York State per Pre-K student. When contracting with CBOs, the district passes \$9,000 per child to that partner, and retains \$4,127 per student for expenses related to administering the Pre-K program. The district retains the entire \$13,127 when a child is served within RCSD. The chart below illustrates this relationship.



Shifting 500 Pre-K slots from CBOs to the district would keep \$4.5 million within RCSD. However, as the [RCSD FAQ indicates](#), it will cost approximately \$5.2 million to operate the two new Pre-K centers, resulting in a \$700,000 deficit over the current baseline.

The district FAQ also references an additional \$2.24 million that the district spends to support CBO Pre-K, and seems to assert that the reduction of these costs will narrow the deficit. However, these funds are already drawn from the district's share of the \$13,127 per student it receives from New York State, and appear to represent costs that will not disappear if the district shifts slots from CBOs to RCSD locations. Necessities like curriculum materials, assessment and screening contracts, and recruitment expenses will continue to exist whether a Pre-K classroom is operated by RCSD or a community partner. It is unclear why the RCSD FAQ implies that these ongoing costs should be viewed as savings from this shift of slots.

Finally, the FAQ and other available materials omit any cost estimate of modifying classrooms in the two schools this summer to meet Pre-K standards. As district staff noted at a February 11<sup>th</sup> Board Committee meeting, these alterations will not be covered under the fully reimbursable Capital Improvement Program.

### Costs of Extended Day or Wrap-around Care

After receiving feedback about the necessity of wrap-around or extended day care for many Pre-K children currently served at CBOs, the district announced that it intends to offer an extended-day enrichment program until 6 pm at both new Pre-K centers. At a February 11<sup>th</sup> Board Committee meeting, the district indicated that this will be funded through the district's federal Title IV allocation. It is unclear how much this will cost, but using these funds for Pre-K will necessarily reduce their use elsewhere within RCSD. This extended day program will only be available during afterschool hours, and only during the 180 school days of the year

By contrast, CBOs are able to access Monroe County child care subsidy dollars to offer care before and after school, during school breaks, and during the summer months.

**Takeaway: The district saves significantly more money by closing Schools 44 and 57 and maintaining the current mixed delivery model than by shifting CBO slots into RCSD.**

### Concern 2: It is unclear whether this plan will positively affect RCSD enrollment

RCSD leadership has positioned this shift of slots from CBOs to district operated schools as way to stem declining enrollment in RCSD schools. They point to an internal analysis which indicates that 75% of students who attend district Pre-K enroll in Kindergarten within RCSD, while only 53% of children who attend CBO Pre-K enroll in RCSD Kindergarten. They have asserted that shifting 500 students from CBOs to district schools will therefore boost RCSD Kindergarten enrollment.

This analysis appears flawed in several key ways.

This single data point establishes an apparent *correlation* between higher rates of CBO enrollment and selecting a non-RCSD elementary option (which could include charter schools, private schools, and moving out of the district altogether). However, that does not mean that there is *causation* between Pre-K choice and Kindergarten enrollment. For example, parents who are pre-disposed to applying to charter schools may simply reveal that preference when they apply to Pre-K. If this shift denies them a spot at the CBO they prefer, they may opt out of the district's Pre-K program altogether.

Second, the Superintendent has indicated that, from his experiences in Washington DC, an effective way to stabilize enrollment is to offer three and four year old Pre-K at district schools. This allows families to grow comfortable with a school, and will increase their likelihood of staying in that school when they have charter school options upon Kindergarten entry. This appears to be a persuasive argument, and reinforces the need for the district to link the district's Pre-K program with promised future changes to the district's managed choice placement policy. Indeed, the February 11<sup>th</sup> presentation alludes to proposed future changes in the managed choice policy by establishing a "higher weight to allow Pre-K students to remain in their same school for Kindergarten."

However, this proposal seems contrary to that vision. Instead, it establishes two new *Pre-K only buildings* with no connection to any district elementary schools. This piecemeal approach to Pre-K planning may make it more difficult to implement a more coordinated school entry policy in subsequent years.

**Takeaway: There's no apparent evidence that the implementation of this proposal will stem the decline in RCSD Kindergarten enrollment, and may instead complicate future efforts to align Pre-K with proposed reforms to the district's managed choice policy.**

### Concern 3: This proposal was developed without any input from parents or the community

RCSD's Pre-K program is viewed locally and throughout New York State and the nation as a model of parent engagement and community partnership. The program has grown over the years despite obstacles like a lack of state funding for transportation, extended day care, and flat per-child funding from New York State. Rochester's early childhood community, which includes not just district staff but longstanding community partnerships like the Early Childhood Development Initiative and ROC the Future, has worked collaboratively to make Pre-K in Rochester a nationally recognized program.

By contrast, this proposal was developed without any community or parent feedback, included only very limited feedback sessions after the proposal was developed for just the two schools facing closure (and not families from the affected CBOs), and therefore may create some serious unintended consequences. A more deliberate and inclusive planning process would grapple with some of the following questions:

- Will the shift of Pre-K slots from community-based settings into a few large Pre-K locations negatively affect district-wide Pre-K enrollment?
- Why are a significant percentage of parents selecting CBO Pre-K over district-operated Pre-K? Is that because of a perception of quality? Proximity to their homes or work? The availability of wrap-around care? The availability of a continuum from infant child care to school age after-school care?
- Given that 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of licensed child care centers in the City of Rochester have RCSD Pre-K contracts, and there is already a [severe shortage of child care in the city](#), how will this proposed cut to CBO Pre-K affect the availability of regulated child care in the city?
- Do parents prefer standalone Pre-K centers or making Pre-K available in more district elementary schools for a wider array of locations and longer continuum of early care and education?
- Are there ways RCSD could partner with Monroe County, CBOs, and home-based child care providers to offer after-school and school break care for children enrolled in district Pre-K?

**Takeaway: By developing and pushing for a vote on this Pre-K proposal without any parent or stakeholder engagement process, RCSD risks disrupting Rochester's highly regarded Pre-K program, complicating the lives of city families, and destabilizing key community partners.**

## The Children's Agenda's Recommendations

As noted above, RCSD does face a budget crisis, and needs to identify savings and additional revenue wherever possible. But this Pre-K proposal on its own does not save any money, and will seemingly cost the district more than maintaining the status-quo mixed delivery model.

RCSD leadership believes that shifting 25% of Pre-K slots to district schools will begin to stem the district's declining Kindergarten enrollment, which could improve the district's long term financial health. However, this piecemeal approach to restructuring Pre-K, done separately from promised changes to the district's managed choice policy, does not appear in line with the superintendent's own successful experiences in the Washington DC area.

Finally, implementing these changes without any community or parent input could damage what the Distinguished Educator identified as a rare "bright spot" within RCSD. Significant changes to Rochester's early childhood system should follow an extensive community and parent engagement process, especially when they don't appear to have any significant budgetary implications for next year and it's families' day-to-day lives that will be most affected.

That said, RCSD should examine and propose improvements to the district's existing Pre-K structure. 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, and school placement stability should be a key weighted factor within a managed choice policy.

At the same time, limitations in the state's Pre-K funding model, especially the lack of reimbursement for transportation and children's wrap-around care needs, necessitate a robust CBO option for district families. Finding the right mix of district-operated Pre-K and CBO Pre-K should be a top priority over the next 12 months.

However, the School Board has been told that they need to vote on this plan on February 27<sup>th</sup> because the decision to shift Pre-K slots into two district buildings is linked to the decision to close School 57 and School 44. And the district needs to notify New York of school closures by March 1<sup>st</sup>. We recognize the urgency of deciding whether to close those two schools, but we do not believe that major changes to Pre-K need to follow the same timeline.

### **The Children's Agenda recommends that the RCSD School Board:**

- **Separate the decision to close School 57 and School 44 from the decision to shift 25% of CBO Pre-K slots into district schools**
- **Determine whether or not to close those two schools on their own merits, given the savings**
- **Table the decision to open two new Pre-K centers**
- **Establish a Board-Staff-Community Task Force to develop a comprehensive Pre-K and early elementary enrollment plan by January, 2021**
- **Petition the Mayor and the Rochester City Council to delay any real estate decisions about the fate of School 57 and School 44 until April, 2021**