TheChildren'sAgenda

Smart Choices. Bold Voices.

Initial Analysis of the Proposed Rochester City School District Budget for 2022 - 2023

CONTEXT

RCSD has unprecedented resources entering the 2022 - 2023 school year. New York state aid and fully funded Foundation Aid will bring tens of millions of dollars in additional, recurring revenue. The district has also received $307.9 million in one-time federal stimulus funds.

Students in the Rochester City School District returned to classrooms this fall after 544 days of remote learning and summer vacation. They have experienced prolong periods of social isolation, food insecurity, a surge in community violence, and direct impacts of the pandemic on their families.

FINDINGS FROM BUDGET ANALYSIS

Having analyzed the available budget information, The Children's Agenda has the following concerns:

1. There are very small investments in restorative practices, Help Zones, and Calming Rooms, mostly requested by individual schools and not district wide.
2. The investment in mental health is significant, but is half the $5 million per year that has been recommended since last fall.
3. The redesigned budget book has eliminated crucial details about positions funded, year-to-year comparisons, or supporting financial information for major initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase spending on restorative practices and mental health supports by $5 million to build a nurturing school culture where students feel safe and supported.
2. Provide detailed reports on how stimulus and general funding spending will address the state improvement plans and consent decree for special education and multilingual learners.
3. Include a detailed summary of positions in the budget book, such as the number of special education teachers and counselors

RCSD Stimulus Spending Responds to Parent and Student Demands, but Transparency and Long-Term Planning are Lacking

The Rochester City School District (RCSD) has unprecedented resources entering the 20222 - 2023 school year. New York State has increased state aid to schools and committed to fully fund Foundation Aid, meaning tens of millions in additional recurring revenue. The district has also received a staggering $307.9 million in one-time federal stimulus funds to deal with the health, academic, and social-emotional impact of COVID-19. **This funding represents a once in a lifetime opportunity for RCSD to tackle long-standing inequities, make critical upgrades to infrastructure, and restructure the district to halt declining enrollment and reduce the structural deficit.**

Funding for the upcoming and later years represents a unique opportunity for RCSD to tackle long-standing inequities, make critical infrastructure upgrades, and reduce the structural deficit.

In June of 2021 The Children's Agenda partnered with 15 parent, student, non-profit and advocacy organizations to draft recommendations on how these unprecedented resources should be spent. The recommendations were signed by three districtwide parent groups: the Bilingual Education Council (BEC), Parent Leadership Advisory Council (PLAC), and Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC). Despite the difficulties the administration has had in presenting a detailed and on-time budget this year, the handling of the federal stimulus dollars has been a bright spot. Dozens of parent, student, and community recommendations were adopted.

Uplifting Mental Health

Parents working with The Children's Agenda in August of 2021 known as the Very Invested Parent Group (VIPs), in partnership with the three districtwide parent groups (BEC, PLAC, SEPAC), became increasingly concerned about students' mental health.

In the fall of 2021, a national emergency for children's mental health was declared by several pediatric health organizations.[1] One national study of all mental health-related emergency department visits showed a sharp increase between mid-March and October of 2020, with increases of 24% among children aged 5-11 years and 31% among adolescents aged 12-17 years, compared with the same period in 2019.[2]

[1] https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/

[2] Leeb RT, Bitsko RH, Radhakrishnan L, Martinez P, Njai R, Holland KM. Mental health-related emergency department visits among children aged <18 years during the COVID-19 pandemic—United States, January 1–October 17, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:1675–80. https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3external icon PMID:33180751

Locally, RCSD students had to wait 544 days between the shift to fully remote learning in March 2020 and the return of full-time, in-person learning in September 2021. Students are returning to school after experiencing prolonged periods of social isolation, food insecurity, homelessness, the death of loved ones/caregivers, a surge in community violence, and the ongoing trauma from all these hardships. **There have been 791 shootings and 141 homicides in Rochester since April 2020, as well as 1,815 deaths in Monroe County from COVID-19.**[3] The total amount of loss, disruption, economic hardship, and trauma is the most children have had to face in several generations.

Since March 2020, RCSD students have experienced or been exposed to:

544 days out of classrooms

651 shootings

115 homicides

1,815 deaths due to COVID-19

To address students' mental health needs, the VIPs, PLAC, SEPAC, and BEC collected 548 petition signatures in support of:

- $30 million over three years invested in restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and mindfulness
- $5 million each year for Help Zones
- $5 million in additional mental health supports and stress reduction supports
- Preventive practice of holding peace circles led by trained staff, parents and students
- To the greatest extent possible, the racial and ethnic background of RCSD staff providing these services should reflect the students with whom they are working

The table below shows what was requested by the coalition of parent groups, compared with what appeared in the proposed budget.

Recommendations of Parent Coalition	Proposed Budget
School Climate, Students' Mental Health, and Trauma ($20M for 2022 - 2023) a. $30M investment in restorative practices over 4 years, $10M in 2021-22, $10M in 2022-23, $5M in 2023-24, $5M in 2024-25	
i. Hire 20 restorative coaches for the next 3 years, up from current 6.	i. $2M Restorative trainings, support staff, 5 restorative coaches each year for 3 years, 4 bilingual restorative staff from outside agency Very small investment on in some schools that requested this support, not in all district schools. Unclear if restorative coaching positions replace ones already in the General Fund.
ii. Provide professional development to all staff on restorative and trauma-informed practices, and stipends for building level staff	ii. $121K Trauma-informed trainings, in addition to trainings and stipends included in (i)

[3] Current as of April 12, 2022, data collected from Monroe County Department of Public Health and Rochester Police Department Open Data Portal.

to run circles and coordinate restorative work in their buildings.	
iii. Include restorative practices as part of the mandatory professional development all staff receive.	iii. Not listed in proposed budget
iv. Stipends for parents and students to run circles and promote restorative practices.	iv. Not listed in proposed budget
b. $5M every year for help zones and alternative to suspensions in every building.	b. $157K Help Zone at Wilson Commencement $188K for Calming Room at School #33 Only money for help zones and calming rooms that were requested by specific schools is included in the budget, with no districtwide approach outlined
c. $5M in additional mental health supports for students including more social workers and counselors.	c. $7.5M in Mental health supports, counselors, and non-traditional supports like music and art (over 3 years) The investment in mental health is significant, but $7.5M over 3 years is $2.5M a year, half the $5M that is asked for ($15M total)
i. Include non-traditional mental health supports such as art and music therapy.	i. $2.1M For all schools to have at least 1 full time art, music, and physical education teacher $1.37M Art, Music, and PE supplies districtwide, African Dance and Drumming at School 46, as well furniture and materials for sensory rooms at Northeast, Franklin, and Monroe
ii. Provide outlets to relieve stress through yoga, dance, drama and art.	ii. (see above)
iii. Start each day with circles for young-people to talk about what they are going through.	iii. Not listed in proposed budget
Recruit and Retain More Teachers of Color ($3M) a. $3M fund to expand the Teaching & Learning Institute beyond East High School.	a. $36K Teach Rochester Program $219K Rochester Urban Fellowship Program $3.1M Bilingual Teacher recruitment and retention incentives $240K Teacher Recruitment Pipeline Program staffing, materials, and travel
b. Tuition reimbursement for staff of color pursuing their teaching certification.	b. $2M Tuition Assistance for working in RCSD 3 years, part of Teacher Recruitment Pipeline Program

Unfilled Positions and Lack of Transparency Threaten Potential Academic and Social-Emotional Gains

The proposed budget increases positions by 121.34 FTEs districtwide. However, 705.65 FTEs are either vacant, frozen, or using long-term substitutes. As of April 2022, 827 full-time positions must be filled by September for RCSD to be fully staffed. The high number of unfilled positions raises serious equity concerns and makes it difficult to judge program effectiveness. It is not publicly shared if certain types of hard to fill positions (ESOL and SPED Teachers)[4] have higher vacancy rates or if some schools are disproportionately affected. The Board and Administration should review vacancy rates by building, department, and position type—making the data publicly available—to address any potential inequities.

The budget book was redesigned to be more user-friendly and shorter, but eliminated crucial details.

The budget book was redesigned for the 2022 - 2023 school year to make it more user friendly and shorter. Unfortunately, the changes have eliminated crucial details that explain what types of positions are funded and where. **An *object summary* lists all FTEs by the type of position such as counselor or elementary school teacher** and can be found in the Syracuse City School District and Buffalo Public Schools budgets. Older RCSD budget books scattered position types across every school and department making it difficult to understand the big picture. Removing all position type data is a step back for transparency and must be reversed. **RCSD must include an object summary in any revised version of the budget book.**

The budget is built using student to staff ratios, yet that information is absent from the budget book. We calculated the student to staff ratios in schools (K-12) with the information presented in the budget book and found a decrease of 0.4. On average, for a school of 592 students there were 100 full-time staff positions budgeted in 2021 - 2022. In 2022 - 2023, that amount will decrease to 552 students for 100 full-time staff.[5] These ratios depend on RCSD being able to fill every budgeted position with a qualified candidate.

The positive effects of reducing class sizes may be counteracted by the presence of inexperienced (first year teachers) or unqualified teachers (substitutes)[6]. **To realize the full academic and social-emotional benefits of the money available to RCSD, hiring and retention of qualified staff is crucial.**

[4] ESOL stands for English for Speakers of Other Languages, and SPED is Special Education

[5] We used school-based staff rather than classroom staff because the budget book did not give that level of detail or provide comparable data for 2021-22.

[6] Jepsen, C., & Rivkin, S. (2009). Potential Tradeoff between Teacher Quality and Class Size. Journal of Human Resources, 44.1. https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.31/3zn.338.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/jhrclasssize.pdf

Specific Transparency Concerns

- **Position and spending summaries** inexplicably do not include the $112 million in federal stimulus spending.
- **No justification** is given for the $10 million in appropriated fund balance usage.
- **All details on specific positions that have been eliminated** from the budget book (e.g., counselors, special education teachers, etc.).
- **Actual spending for the previous school year** and current amended spending columns have been removed.
- **Major budget initiatives are outlined with no supporting financial information**; for example "Addressing chronic absenteeism" is listed without any further explanation or details.
- **The budget book was presented one week late, then removed from the website and reposted three weeks late** with $30M in revisions, no detailed public explanation of the revisions, and only one week before the public hearing for community feedback.