

I am Dr. Lesli Myers-Small proudly serving as Superintendent of the Rochester City School District (RCSD). It is an honor to have the opportunity to address you and, more importantly, to thank you for your unwavering commitment to meeting the unique needs of the RCSD over the last few years. We are grateful for the substantial fiscal support you provided, including the State Aid advance that was authorized last year. We also welcomed the appointment of a State Monitor, Dr. Shelley Jallow, to assist us in addressing our academic and fiscal challenges. Dr. Jallow's expertise has proven invaluable as has the leadership and guidance from Interim Commissioner Betty Rosa and her NYSED team.

### Challenges

Rochester is one of the highest needs school districts in New York State.

- More than 22% of the student population includes Students with Disabilities.
- According to ACT Rochester, an initiative of the Rochester Area Community Foundation, more than 50% of the children living in the City of Rochester live in poverty and, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 32% of the City's entire population lives in poverty.
- The District's Extraordinary Needs Percentage is 92%; the highest rate in the Big 5.
- RCSD serves 4,032 ELL pupils and provides services to students speaking 65 languages.

### Academic Progress

Despite these challenges, the District continues to make progress toward improving academic achievement. Graduation rates in August 2020 reflected the highest graduation rates in over a decade. The four-year graduation rate was 68.2% representing a 5.2% increase over the previous year. The following progress is also noteworthy:

- 8.1 percentage point increase for English Language Learners, from 42.6% to 50.7%
- .9 percentage point increase for Students with Disabilities, from 47.0% to 47.9%
- 4.0 percentage point increase for Hispanic students, from 62.6% to 66.6%

### Academic Goals

The Rochester City School District is being asked by state and community constituents and government agencies to provide evidence of quality; increased access, graduation and retention rates; and higher student and school performance than at any time in history. Added to this is the complexity of navigating curriculum and instruction in the light of a pandemic, which has highlighted areas of structural inequity for our students.

The gap in performance between students attending RCSD schools and students attending schools throughout the state has remained statistically the same for over twenty years. Despite changes in federal mandates, state standards, and state assessments, students in RCSD have consistently performed be-

low their peers. The state assessments represent only one tool to measure proficiency, however, performance hovering near 10% represents approximately 90% of the students in classrooms across the city unable to meet or surpass state standards in Mathematics and English. This sobering data drives district decisions in areas like academic interventions, chronic absenteeism, special education, staffing, school designations, school choice, charter school enrollment, resource allocation, and high school performance.

### Financial Progress

In November 2020 the State Monitor's Financial Plan was presented and later unanimously approved by our Board of Education. In conjunction with the Plan, the following has been accomplished:

- For the first time a multi-year financial plan has been created.
- Several Board policies are undergoing review and others are being established including those related to Fund Balance, Procurement and Budget Transfers.
- The Board has revamped its committee meetings to provide greater financial oversight.
- The District's antiquated Financial Management System is being upgraded.
- All vendor contracts are being reviewed with greater scrutiny with a focus on affordability and proof of impact on student outcomes.
- The District has initiated a process to align staffing with current needs given the declining student population.

### Executive Budget

The pandemic has certainly turned our world upside down. We have faced challenges we never thought possible. As you are well aware, those challenges included equipping our students with devices and connectivity to enable them to attend classes remotely as well as providing professional development and support to our instructional staff as they shifted to providing instruction in a virtual environment. As we are now beginning to bring some students back to take part in a hybrid model that includes in-person classroom instruction, we are facing sizable PPE and facility maintenance/cleaning related expenses.

We are thankful that the Executive Budget restores the withholdings that have already taken place and provides assurances that further reductions will not take place in the 2020-2021 school year. However, while we are pleased that the Executive Budget includes sizable federal support to maintain funding levels, we remain concerned that the proposal as currently structured will set us up for a financial cliff in subsequent years. RCSD is heavily reliant on State Aid, as local support from the City of Rochester has remained flat for the last 16 years at \$119.1 M. Furthermore, we are troubled that we could again be faced with mid-year reductions that erode stability and have proven extremely disruptive to the academic program in the past.

Other concerns we have are as follow:



- The District's School Health Services funding has not kept pace with the requirements to meet critical student health and medical needs. The proposed \$1.2 million cut must be restored and additional aid provided. The social and emotional supports needed by the students have been further impacted by this prolonged pandemic and, as such, requires additional funding.
- Although the Executive Budget calls to reduce the charter school tuition rates, the supplemental reimbursement rate will be reduced by one-half of the amount we save. The continued expansion is not sustainable under the current funding model. The State should take action to require local approval of charter school growth in saturated school districts such as Rochester.
- We are currently working with the sponsors of the third phase of our major capital construction plan to ensure that the scope of the work is aligned with enrollment trends, academic programming and District priorities and is affordable. We look forward to working collaboratively to ensure that the proposal moves forward as part of the 2021-2022 State Budget to address critical facility needs.
- Career and Technical Education funding through Special Services Aid must be expanded to increase the \$3,900 per pupil formula-based cap and aligned with current programs to provide funding for 9<sup>th</sup> grade pupils.
- Given the number of English Language Learners we serve, we are requesting additional/equitable funding for these students as well.

In summary, I believe we have made great strides over the last several months working with our appointed State Monitor. We were ecstatic when we balanced our unbalanced structural deficit budget as of November 30, 2020. The Executive Budget's reliance on non-recurring federal dollars causes us to take pause. We remember the Gap Elimination Adjustment era and we are fully cognizant that we do not have reserves that will allow us to survive another financial cliff. Inequities in Education have existed far too long. We need a funding formula that recognizes and supports the unique needs of the children of RCSD. Our children deserve an equal chance for a quality public education. I thank you for your time.