



Rochester City School District



Implementation Report

Council of the Great City Schools
Males of Color Pledge
October 22, 2014

Introduction

The Rochester City School District in Upstate New York serves approximately 30,000 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten through 12. Our student population is comprised of 60 percent African American children and 26 percent of Hispanic origin. Our families face the sad reality of living in the fifth poorest city among the nation’s 75 largest metropolitan areas, with the third highest concentration of poverty in Rochester neighborhoods.¹ Currently, 84 percent of District families are registered as qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch—and the actual number may be higher, because all students receive free meals as part of the federal government’s Community Eligibility Option.

Though student achievement is a struggle in nearly every district with high concentrations of poverty, school performance in Rochester is unacceptably low. Our District ranks at or near the bottom statewide in student achievement, with the lowest test scores and graduation rates among New York’s “Big 5” school districts with similar demographics. Our graduation rate for the 2009 cohort of students was 48.1 percent and it has not surpassed 50 percent in the past five years. Performance is especially low among our students of color, with a graduation rate of 47.7 percent for African American students and 49.9 percent for Hispanic students

Poverty is a challenge, but the Rochester City School District believes it cannot be an excuse for low student achievement. Since 2011, the District has focused on five distinct priorities that will improve school performance and outcomes for our families.

- Student achievement and growth
- Effective, efficient allocation of resources
- Communication and customer service
- Parent, family and community involvement
- Management systems

A Focused Theory of Action for Student Success

<i>Close opportunity gap</i>	<i>Provide middle-class opportunities</i>	<i>Prevent interventions</i>	<i>Improve outcomes</i>	<i>Stabilize finances</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Quality early education ➤ More instructional time ➤ Social-emotional supports in multiple places ➤ Better technology in classrooms ➤ Additional support through community partners and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Rigorous curriculum ➤ Broader access to textbooks and reading material ➤ Excellent instruction ➤ Industry-certified CTE programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ More and better learning time ➤ Positive engagement activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arts - Music - Sports - AP courses - Extra-curricular activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Achievement scores ➤ Graduation rates ➤ College and career readiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Stem enrollment loss ➤ Improve quality so that parents choose RCSD schools ➤ Attract new families

¹ *Poverty and the Concentration of Poverty in the Nine-County Greater Rochester Area*, Rochester Area Community Foundation, December 2013 <www.racf.org>

We are focusing our financial and human resources on these five priorities, with strategies and measurable goals articulated in the District’s Action Plan.² The essence of Rochester’s plan is to close the opportunity gap for students in poverty, then offer them educational opportunities.

Rochester’s plan recognizes the special challenges to achievement faced by our boys and young men of African American and Hispanic descent. What follows is a brief summary of the strategies and tactics we are using to implement the pledge our district has taken, in collaboration with other districts in the Council of Great City Schools, to improve the academic and social outcomes of males of color.

Pre-school Education

Though we have a long way to go before closing the opportunity gap for young males, Rochester schools are proud to say that no district in our county offers more opportunities to its youngest students for full-day Pre-K, full-day Kindergarten and structured summer learning. Rochester offers Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK), which means that every four-year-old in the city is eligible to attend at no cost to families. About half of our UPK students attend city schools, and half in classrooms at community organizations that partner with the District. Until recently, the large majority of our children were in half-day programs. This year, our total Pre-K enrollment is more than 2,100 four-year-old students – nearly 200 more than in 2013 – with 94 percent in full-day classrooms, compared to 28 percent in full-day programs last year.



Elementary and Middle School



Reading By Third Grade.

Full-day Pre-Kindergarten is one component of a comprehensive strategy to help students read on grade level by third grade – the top academic priority we are pursuing to improve student achievement for males of color.

Educational research shows that third grade literacy is a key marker for success in later school. Students must learn to read by third grade, so that they can read to learn for the rest of their lives.

² *We Will Treat Every Child Like One of Our Own: An Action Plan for the Rochester City School District 2014-18*, Rochester City School District, March 2014 <<http://www.rcsdk12.org/actionplan>>

Working aggressively to reduce summer learning loss summer is another component of our strategy. We have expanded summer learning opportunities for every child in our District over the past three years—through structured summer-school intervention and enrichment programs, collaboration with city libraries and recreation centers, and partnership with non-profit agencies that serve our students. The “Summer of Reading 2014” initiative provided every district child in Pre-K through second grade took a backpack of up to ten books for their home libraries. Students in grades three through twelve each received two chapter books, plus recommended summer reading lists and a required reading assignment to complete in September.

The District has also increased literacy instruction. For example, we have increased the number of dedicated reading teachers from zero in the 2011-12 school year to 16 this year, with plans to increase until all students have the extra literacy support they need. Strengthening literacy content and instruction in other subject areas is another element of Rochester’s relentless focus on helping young boys and girls to read on grade level by third grade.

Sports, Arts, and Extra-Curricular Activities

During the last four years, Rochester schools have added 81 sports teams, with an estimated 5,250 students participating in sports this year, a majority of them young men. As part of our focus on males of color, we added the first modified football program in District history in 2013-14. Interest among seventh- and eighth-grade boys has exceeded expectations, with more than 150 young men participating on four teams. Our intent is to create a pipeline that will feed into strong varsity football teams, engaging young males and their families at each grade level from seventh grade through graduation.

The District is also increasing offerings in art, music, physical education, and other extracurricular activities. Since 2011-12, when Dr. Bolgen Vargas became superintendent, the District has increased the number of art teachers by 43 percent and music teachers by 18 percent. We have also added a city-wide marching band and all-city chorus this year. Activities like these keep students positively engaged in school with their peers. They also contribute to parent engagement, providing positive reasons for parents to visit and participate in their child’s school.

More and Better Learning Time.

Providing students additional time for learning and support is a second academic priority that will drive student achievement.

SUITING UP FOR SUCCESS



CARLOS ORTIZ/SPORTS BANDS STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
East High teacher Randy Rudolph, left, offers words of encouragement to student Andre Jenkins before a modified football game against Monroe High. The City School District is using sports and other programs to encourage citizenship and good study habits.

City uses modified football program to make connection with students

James Johnson
Staff writer



The traditional school calendar – 180 days of instruction, 6.3 hours per day – holds time constant and leaves the amount of learning as a variable. In districts like Rochester, students need more time and support than students in higher-income districts, where most families are able to provide higher levels of support at home.

Yet, before the 2013-14 school year, Rochester students received the least instructional time of any group of students in our county, and among the lowest in the nation. To improve achievement we are varying time in school to make student learning and growth a constant. We increased learning time for all students in 2012-13, by eliminating the 50-year practice of dismissing students early on Wednesdays. This year we have 10 elementary and K-8 schools with well-planned expanded-day schedules based on national TIME Collaborative standards; last year there were five. These schools have an additional 300 hours of instructional time, which provide more development and planning time for teachers and more academic support and enrichment activities for our students.



Student Attendance

Reducing absenteeism has been a priority since Dr. Vargas became superintendent. Last year more than 10,000 Rochester students were chronically absent – missing 10 percent or more of the school year. National research and the District’s own data prove a direct link between student attendance and student achievement. The most recent state assessments show that Rochester students in grades 3 through 8 who attend school 95 percent of the time have at least a 75 percent greater chance of performing at grade level in English Language Arts. Ninth-graders who meet this goal are four times more likely to graduate Rochester schools on time than those with lower attendance.



To improve attendance, the District first improved methods for collecting data, with a strong focus on reporting mechanisms and accuracy. Then we began to work on reducing the barriers to attendance for our chronically-absent students. Because attendance habits are formed at an early age, we are targeting students in Kindergarten through grade three in schools with low attendance.

When a second-grader regularly misses school, it’s not the student’s problem; it’s a community issue. We have engaged city and county government, the United Way of Greater Rochester, and numerous other community resources to help with this critical need. Joined by community volunteers, dozens of District staff members make monthly visits to the homes of our chronically-absent

students to learn the reasons they aren't attending school and find solutions. (These attendance "blitzes" supplement the daily outreach of parent liaisons in each school and the District attendance office.) We also meet monthly with community members to help us work with families to improve attendance.

This year we launched a community impact campaign to build awareness of the link between low attendance and low achievement. The campaign uses dramatic images designed to grab the attention of our parents, driving home the importance of attendance, especially in from pre-kindergarten through grade three.

Keeping Young Males in School

The dramatic expansion in arts, music, sports, and other extracurricular activities will help to engage our male students of color at all grade levels. To treat every child as one of our own, we are attempting to create schools that are more exciting than the streets, so that young men want to attend and never consider dropping out.

In our classrooms, Rochester schools are helping teachers to improve instruction and expanding academic supports to increase graduation rates for our young males of color. Recently, the District added a new Latin American Literature elective to its already robust African-American program. The District is also planning a "Males in Mind" science fiction course that includes a selection of literature with high interest to young men. Academic supports include online credit recovery courses and a strategic summer-school program that provides seniors who don't graduate in June the extra support they need to earn a diploma. This summer, 258 students – a record number – graduated in our August commencement.

Career and Technical Education

Exposing male students to career opportunities and helping them to find work are powerful ways to teach the importance of staying in school. With the exception of a few high-quality programs, Rochester schools – once a regional leader in career and



technical education – have fallen behind in providing CTE opportunities to our students. To change that in the near term, our District pays tuition so that many Rochester students can take CTE courses at the same cooperative educational service used by suburban districts. This year, we hired a school chief who is solely focused on career pathways and CTE programs. One of the new programs he is overseeing is P-TECH Rochester, an academic and career program based on the innovative P-TECH model in Brooklyn. P-TECH Rochester prepares students for jobs in the Computer Information Technology industry by bringing together the best elements of high school, college, and the professional world. Students in grades 9-14 are matched with a business mentor, take college classes, and gain professional work experience during their high school years.

Single-Gender and Alternative High School Programs

The Leadership Academy for Young Men, a single-gender school we created for our young



males, is currently in its fourth year. The Leadership Academy is a high school of seventh through twelfth grades that focuses on the importance of discipline, respect, and education. By providing males with a single-gender setting, they learn in an environment with minimal distractions and can focus on building character and learning leadership. The school has based its teachings off of the five prides – respect, integrity, loyalty, accountability, and courage. The Leadership Academy also works with community partners to help prepare our male students for college and careers.

A new Rochester program, All City High, provides alternative paths to graduation for young males and females who struggle to succeed in a traditional high school. All City High meets a range of student needs with tiered start times, a menu of year-long and semester-long courses, more social and emotional support services than other high schools, expanded opportunities for Career and Technical Education, and art, music, sports, and extra-curricular activities. Though it is newly available as a city-wide program, the District pioneered All City High in 2012-13 to serve students from nine high schools that were being phased out over two years. More than 500 of these “phase-out” students graduated, demonstrating the benefit of the non-traditional high school model.

Serving Students With Disabilities

Nothing we are doing to serve our young men of color is more important than improving services for students with disabilities. The Rochester City School District has an extremely high level of classification overall; about 18.5 percent in 2012-13. This compares to 9.9 percent of students in Monroe County’s suburban districts. More than twice as many males as females in the District are classified as disabled. The graduation rate for our students with disabilities has been terribly low – less than 19 for the 2008 cohort graduating in 2012, compared to 47 percent statewide.

These results reflect an outdated approach to providing special education services that is not meeting the needs of our students and families. We are moving aggressively to implement the practices that are achieving far better results in other “Big 5” districts and suburban schools. We are expanding the continuum of services for students with disabilities to reduce classification and help students who remain classified to achieve their best potential in the least restrictive environment possible.

Increased use of consultant teachers in general education classrooms is a key component of Rochester’s strategy to modernize special education services. Another is expanding language enrichment and intervention for students at young ages. Of the 6,453 students with disabilities in the District last year, 20 percent had a speech or language impairment, which is sometimes

the result of not growing up in a language-rich environment. We also are redeploying resources to support language development. Fifteen percent of our Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funding has been redirected to interventions that support reading by third grade with the intent to decrease early classification.

Reducing suspension and expulsion rates

Unfortunately, many of our males of color succumb to the violent neighborhoods that surround them, some by dropping out and some by bringing disruptive behavior into Rochester schools. Suspension rates for general education students in Rochester are consistent with many other urban districts, which means they are too high overall, and especially so for African American and Latino males.

To address this issue, we developed a community task force on student behavior that will launch in the near future. Convened by the Rochester Area Community Foundation, the task force is comprised of approximately 40 members representing all stakeholders – city governments,



community action organizations, social service organizations, District leadership, teachers, school administration, students, and parents. The task force is developing a new code of conduct to be launched over the next year; it will implement additional recommendations and track progress over the following two years.

Conclusion

The Rochester City School District is committed to the pledge to improve academic and social outcomes of boys and young men of color. We are increasing our efforts to prepare them for college and careers, while working to decrease the disproportionate number who drop out or are suspended. The District’s Action Plan identifies our goals and specific measures for assessing our progress. We are a proud supporter of “My Brother’s Keeper,” the White House initiative to address the opportunity gap faced by males of color and help ensure that all of our nation’s youth can reach their full potential. In Rochester, we believe that the challenge, and the opportunity, can be stated simply:

We know that every child has the desire and potential to succeed. We cannot provide all of our students a stable home or supportive neighborhood. But we can provide schools where they are surrounded by caring adults who give them the time, love, and support they need. We will treat every child like one of our own.