

Rochester Democrat & Chronicle

RCSD joins initiative to help minority youths



Justin Murphy, Staff writer 9:55 p.m. EDT July 21, 2014



Rochester School District Superintendent Bolgen Vargas and Board of Education President Van White were in Washington, D.C., Monday to pledge the district's commitment to a national program intended to boost performance and graduation rates among young minority men.

Vargas and White joined President Barack Obama and leaders from 59 other urban school districts for the announcement of new funding and partnerships for My Brother's Keeper, a five-year, \$200 million initiative unveiled by the president this past winter for the purpose of improving attendance, behavior and academic success among black and Hispanic boys in urban schools.

The participating districts are part of the Council of the Great City Schools, which collectively educate about a third of the black and Hispanic boys in the country.

"Our job as urban educators is not to reflect or perpetuate the inequities that too many of our males of color face," Council Executive Director Michael Casserly said in a statement. "Our job is to eliminate those inequities — and that is what we pledge to do."

As part of its participation, the district is pledging to improve data tracking of absenteeism and disciplinary problems with the goal of reducing both; to increase the number of minority boys taking honors or Advanced Placement classes; to make curriculum more culturally appropriate; to reduce, as appropriate, the number of minorities classified as having disabilities; and to "engage in a broader discussion and examination of how issues of race, language, and culture affect the work of our district."

Several of the goals, including an emphasis on early education, are already priorities for Rochester, which like many urban districts across the country is wracked by poverty.

"The district is providing young men increased support to succeed in school at every grade level," Vargas said in a statement. "From the conversion to full-day prekindergarten to adding more than 70 new sports teams in two years to strengthening career and technical education, our district is committed to closing the achievement gap and helping males of color to graduate ready for success in later life."

In the 2009 Rochester cohort of 2,400 students, just 44.2 percent of males graduated by August 2013 compared with 52 percent of females. Minorities made up 89 percent of the total cohort and 46.9 percent of those graduated, compared with 58.5 percent of white students.

There is no funding attached to the pledge or specific benchmarks that pledging districts are expected to meet. A Rochester schools spokesman said the council "will collect data from member districts to continue the dialog with the Department of Education, White House and Congress."

Buffalo Public Schools is also among the pledging districts.