



*Testimony Before The New York Senate Finance Committee,
Assembly Ways and Means Committee,
Senate Education Committee,
and
Assembly Education Committee*

February 14, 2017

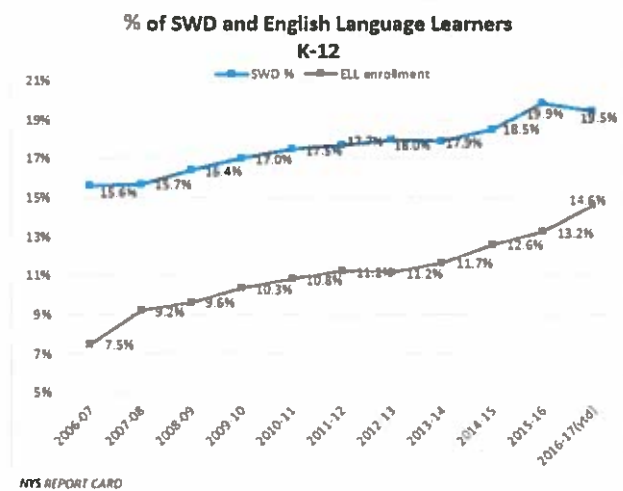
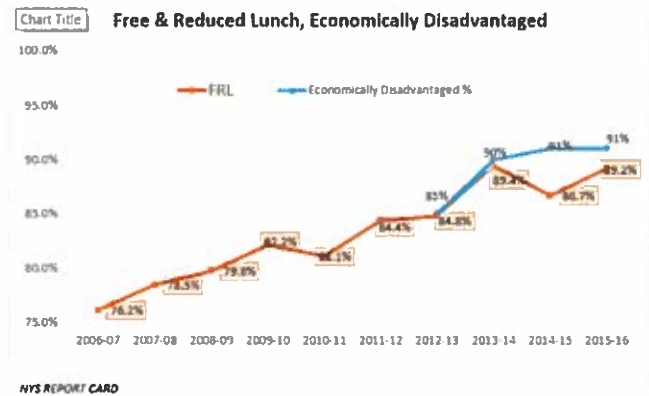
Presented By:
Barbara Deane-Williams
Superintendent
Rochester City School District

Introduction

Thank you for the privilege of testifying before you today. My name is Barbara Deane-Williams, and it has been my honor to serve as Superintendent of Rochester city schools since August of 2016. I have more than 35 years of experience as a school and district administrator, including 11 years as a Superintendent in rural and large districts. I spent four years as Superintendent of the Greece, New York schools—the State’s ninth-largest district—and served more recently as Senior Deputy Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, one of the nation’s highest-performing urban districts, before returning to Rochester.

As we are all well aware, many Rochester children face enormous challenges at home and at school. A report from the Rochester Area Community Foundation, based on the latest census data, shows that Rochester is the fifth-poorest city in the United States among the top 75 metropolitan areas nationally. Our District is working with the City of Rochester and community partners on the Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative, and we hope to report soon that poverty is on the decline. But today more than 52 percent of Rochester children live below the poverty line, the highest child-poverty rate among the top 75 metro areas. More than 16 percent of Rochester families live in extreme poverty, also the highest rate nationally.

The high concentration of poverty, coupled with the trauma that impacts many Rochester children, means that they need extra attention and support from us—the adults who serve them at school—in order to succeed academically and graduate ready for college and careers. The number of low-income students, students with disabilities and students learning English as a new language have all increased significantly in recent years.



We Deeply Appreciate the State's Support

I am here today to talk about steps our District and community are taking together to address these challenges and improve education outcomes for Rochester children.

First, though, I would like to thank the committees—along with Governor Cuomo, our local delegation and your colleagues in the Assembly and Senate—for your past, present and anticipated future support of public education.

One program that especially benefits Rochester children is the State's support of full-day Pre-Kindergarten, which research shows is a critical component of closing the school readiness gap for urban students. More than 2,000 four-year-old children in Rochester attend high-quality Pre-Kindergarten classes, which are available to all City four-year-olds and serve 92 percent of the eligible population. This year, we are also providing high-quality Pre-K to more than 1,000 three-year-old students who have high needs based on income or other factors. Early education is an essential component of our strategy to help Rochester students to read on grade level by third grade—which research shows is one of the best predictors of on-time graduation rates—and we deeply appreciate the State's support.

On behalf of the Rochester Board of Education I also want to thank the legislature and Governor for supporting Phase 2 of our Facilities Modernization Plan. Ten Rochester schools were modernized under the Phase 1 plan, and thanks to your support 13 more schools will be renovated over the next five years in Phase 2. We especially want to thank the Assembly, Senate and Governor's office for enacting a law last year to adjust the maximum cost allowance for eight of our buildings. This change will enable us to complete these renovation projects more efficiently and at lower cost, with less disruption to our families and staff. We are deeply grateful to the State of New York for your support of Rochester students.

Another State initiative we are especially excited about is the Smart Schools Bond Act, which will allow our District to invest \$47 million in technology that improves learning and prepares our students for the 21st century economy. Rochester was the first Big 5 district in the State to submit its Smart Schools Investment Plan last July, which was developed collaboratively with our teachers, school administrators, students, families and labor partners. I am proud to say that Rochester schools are recognized nationally for effective use of technology in schools, and this investment plan will take us to the next level. We hope to receive final approval soon.

The plan will expand connectivity across the District and update classroom technology, while providing the professional development and curriculum our educators need to infuse the new technology into teaching and learning. Most exciting for our students is the “one-to-one” technology our plan will enable over the course of three years. Every student from grade 3 to 12 will receive their own computing device to use at school, and eventually at home. Technology is essential for Rochester students to access the information they need to be ready for college and careers, but research shows that nearly 50 percent of Rochester families cannot afford Internet service. Our District is working with the City of Rochester and other partners on ways to provide broadband access for these families. We also have discussed this need with the New York State Broadband Program Office and applied for a grant. We are confident that with the support we have received from State legislators, the City of Rochester, higher education leaders and community organizations, New York State will soon identify a path to address this need. We want Rochester to be among the first cities in the country to resolve the digital divide that puts low-income families at a disadvantage.

Assessing Our System

Four days ago, the State Education Department released graduation data on the 2012 cohort of students who earned diplomas in 2016. Rochester’s four-year graduation rate was 47.5% in June and 53% in August, both up 2% from 2015. These modest increases offer signs of encouragement but cannot hide the fact that too few of our children are crossing the stage—especially as I sit next to colleague Superintendents from the Big 5 who are achieving higher graduation rates. Simply put, Rochester graduation rates have remained unacceptably low for entirely too long. Ensuring equity demands that we provide our schools the necessary resources to accelerate progress until we achieve a 100 percent graduation rate.

Prioritizing educational equity is one of five areas of focus I bring to the leadership of Rochester schools. Personally, striving to achieve equity of opportunity for students of all races and backgrounds is one of my core values. Professionally, I know from academic research on successful school and District turnarounds that an equity focus will reduce learning gaps and raise student achievement.

Leading for equity does not mean taking resources from high-performing schools to support low-performing ones. It means providing all students opportunities to learn, and giving those who fall behind the extra support they need to achieve grade-level standards and high-school graduation. An equity focus will ensure that students receive early intervention and quality grade-level content, with access to a rigorous and cognitively demanding curriculum that includes access to advanced placement courses and career education opportunities.



"All students should achieve graduation. One hundred percent of them. I believe that providing all children with a high-quality education, along with supports to achieve graduation, is the great civil rights challenge of our time."

*Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams on prioritizing equity
September 6, 2016 - Superintendent's Conference Day*

Along with prioritizing equity, our District is focused on strengthening four other capabilities that have helped high-poverty districts achieve higher performance.

- *Building relational capacity*
- *Nurturing innovation*
- *Creating coherence*
- *Accountability for action*

While establishing these areas of focus, I did not presume to understand the specific needs of Rochester schools when I became Superintendent last August. I used my first 100 days to engage in a structured listening and learning process with teachers, students, Principals, parents, staff members and community partners who care about Rochester schools. Together with my leadership team we engaged more than 1,500 stakeholders to understand how the current system impacts them and how we can make it better.

We have found many bright spots and examples of good work. The challenge Rochester faces is building coherence in the system, so that all the resources in our District are aligned for collective impact. The Rochester City School District's Central Office, for example, is not currently designed to focus squarely on helping schools improve. We are redesigning Central Office immediately as a service organization that supports schools rather than a bureaucracy that controls their actions.

We will maintain fiscal control through “bounded autonomy”—giving each school team the level of independence that matches its demonstrated capacity to yield results, as measured by Academic Return on Investment (AROI). Using the AROI model, the District leadership team will identify and assess where current resources are not working well for students and teachers, taking actions to re-align investments in high-priority and high-return areas. AROI will help us to put greater emphasis on increasing student learning and to provide services more efficiently. It gives us the ability to compare the costs of strategies as we work within tighter fiscal constraints.

Actions to Address System Deficiencies

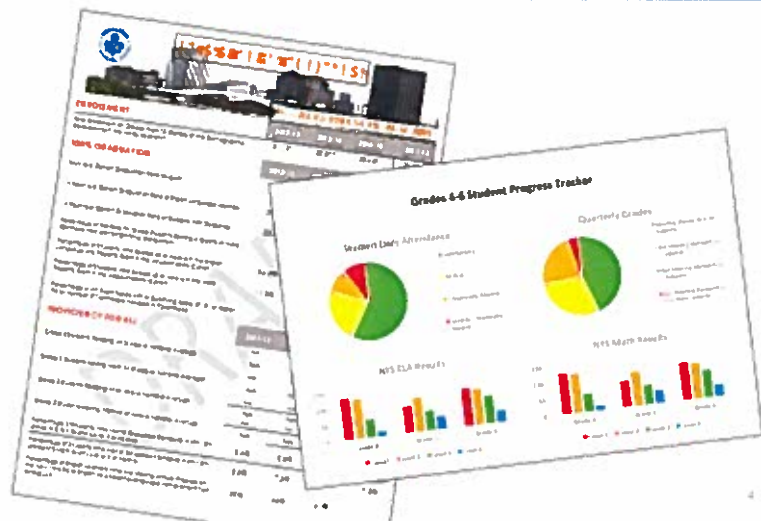
We have collaborated with the Board of Education to take many immediate steps that will improve the functioning of our school system.

- *Every student by face and name, every five weeks.* The Chiefs who supervise our Principals have the direct responsibility to ensure that each school reviews the academic, behavior and attendance record of every student every five weeks. They also are accountable for ensuring that schools take immediate actions to close gaps through research-based interventions. The School Chiefs report directly to me, and I work with all 57 of our Principals regularly to drive this shift to personalized intervention and support for every student. Dr. Kendra March, our newly appointed Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning, has a record of school improvement in large urban districts and joins me in this work.
- *Receivership Zone of Innovation and Support.* We have created a structure to provide direct supervision and support for Rochester’s eight receivership schools. The receivership zone is led by a new Chief who is a former Blue Ribbon School Principal with past experience in Rochester and the Chicago public school system. She provides personalized support to the receivership Principals and works closely with the State Education Department to monitor their progress.
- *School Partnership and Support Teams.* We have redeployed more than 40 Central Office educators on teams led by the School Chiefs that will visit every Rochester classroom during the current semester. These teams report to Deputy Superintendent Dr. Kendra March on specific services, interventions and training needed to improve student performance. This deep dive will inform our budget, providing information to help ensure

that resources and educational opportunities are equitably distributed across the District. The teams also will identify bright spots that can serve as models for other schools and classrooms to replicate.

- *Teacher and Principal development.* To build internal capacity, we are creating leadership pipelines that will develop strong school administrators from our in-house talent pool, along with structured programs to create teacher-leaders who work with their peers to improve instruction. I deeply appreciate the strong collaboration we are receiving in this work from two of our labor partners, the Rochester Teachers Association and the Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester. I am also grateful to the New York City Leadership Academy and the Bank Street Education Center, both of which are providing expert technical assistance through separate grant-funded projects.
- *Chief Ombudsman and Compliance Officer.* This new position, held by an experienced civil rights attorney, advocates for students and families who are not receiving services or due process rights to which they are entitled. The focus is on English Language Learners and students with disabilities, which will help Rochester meet compliance requirements under Part 154 and Part 200 of the Commissioner’s regulations for public education.
- *New data tools* that enable school teams to track student progress in real time. We need to give schools the resources they need to know every student by face and name, so that instructional teams can continually assess their progress and personalize support to keep them on track.

New RCSD Scorecards and Progress Trackers



Actions to Strengthen the Budget Process

In December we named a new Chief Financial Officer—Everton Sewell, who served previously as our budget director and brought many years of corporate finance experience to Rochester schools in 2010. Everton is assisted by Budget Director Rodney Asse, a former management and finance director with BOCES and treasurer for Greece schools; and James Giordano, a former school superintendent who also served as deputy superintendent for finance in the Greece schools.

They are overseeing a line-by-line analysis that will allow us to build a new budget based on the needs of our students and schools. This contrasts with the traditional “rollover” approach, where budgets are carried forward from the previous year and adjusted based on cost and revenue projections.

We will fund requirements first, then prioritize the other services we want students to have, funding as many of the non-required services as our revenue can support. We do not intend to eliminate any services for children. Maintaining them will require us to be innovative, designing new ways to deliver services or finding alternative ways to fund them.

We are still in the process of developing our draft budget.

- School Chiefs are meeting with building Principals to analyze enrollment, staff utilization and capacity to improve scheduling efficiency.
- Department heads at Central Office have been directed to flatten their organizations to ensure greater accountability and enable redeployment of resources to schools.
- We have dedicated a high-level communications person who is working with the Finance Department to share information transparently, using technology as a tool to invite broad public input.

Investing in Equity and Student Achievement

As my team conducts a line-by-line analysis of the budget, they are looking through an equity lens. We must use our resources to give students in every school similar opportunities—the same kinds of opportunities students in suburban districts enjoy.

We also are focused on meeting classroom needs first. This is not just a matter of equity, but of State Education Law requirements to provide every student a sound, basic education.

- Our review of staff and schedule information has revealed a disturbing fact: Rochester does not have enough reading or math teachers to provide adequate instruction for our students to meet grade-level expectations. We need to increase the quantity of teachers and to improve the quality of instruction by funding professional development at appropriate levels. In grades 3 through 8 alone, Rochester has a combined total of more than 12,000 students who need Academic Intervention Services in math and/or English Language Arts. Rochester has 60 reading teachers, which falls far short of our need, and we have only a handful of math intervention teachers this year. More intervention teachers are needed in both subject areas to meet Part 100 regulations.
- We also need bilingual teachers and support services for the 26 percent of our students whose families speak Spanish at home; teachers of English as a new language for our immigrant students; special education teachers for students with disabilities; technology teachers and others to meet the instructional needs of our students

I want to be clear that our analysis is still ongoing, and Rochester intends to use current staff to the greatest extent possible. However, we will clearly need to invest in a significant number of new teachers for Rochester schools to meet State requirements.

Using Internal Resources: Redeploy, Repurpose, Reinvest

Here are target areas in the District budget where we intend to redeploy and repurpose resources that can be reinvested in programs with a high return for Rochester students.

- *Use fewer substitute teachers.* We want every student to have a certified teacher from the first day of school. It is the right thing to do educationally and the smart thing to do financially. We are working aggressively to make that happen. Last Saturday, for example, I welcomed more than 80 teacher candidates to a kickoff recruitment event that was months earlier than in past years. We also are collaborating with our labor partners on professional development opportunities that don't take time out of the classroom, like a book study we announced



RCSD Teacher Recruitment Event – Feb. 11, 2017

this week. Through efforts like these we can save a significant portion of our substitute teacher costs, which are \$13 million this year.

- *Improve class fill rates.* Under the centralized approach to scheduling, many classes in many schools are significantly under-enrolled. This year School Chiefs will work with Principals and the placement office to improve scheduling at the school level. This will help us to optimize teacher-student ratios, which could generate a major savings.
- *Reduce consulting service contracts.* Our current budget includes more than \$60 million in contracts to outside service providers separate from our food, transportation and health services. We will maintain contracts that provide direct services to children and achieve good results, but will significantly reduce the use of outside consultants by relying on our in-house experts.
- *Redeploy District Office staff.* Many staff positions assigned to Central Office provide direct services to schools and can be placed under school Principals to provide greater staffing flexibility with lower Central Office costs.
- *Contain health care costs* by working with our labor partners on wellness programs and sharing of cost increase.
- *Reduce overtime costs* by encouraging Principals and School Chiefs to stagger staff schedules.
- *Leverage community partnerships.* Our schools and District families benefit from the strong support of many organizations—City and County government, the higher education community, foundations and community collaborations like the Children’s Agenda and ROC the Future. By strengthening coherence among the projects and programs supported by these groups, we can maintain services to children at less cost to the District.

The Unmet Need of Rochester’s Children

In our line-by-line analysis of the budget, we are committed to squeezing the last juice out of the lemon. We are making every effort to impact employee changes through attrition, while reducing other areas of expenditure, including contracts not directly serving students, substitute and overtime use, health care and other costs of operating the District.

By reducing non-essential costs we expect to generate \$15 million to be reinvested.

However, the District faces a remaining budget gap of \$58 million for 2017-18, and there are several areas where the needs of Rochester children cannot be met without additional State support. To meet the educational requirements of our students, Rochester city schools need a Foundation Aid increase to cover our shortfall over the Governor’s proposal. This will enable the eight schools in Rochester’s Receivership and Innovation Zone to maintain resources the State Education Department has directed us to put in place. The Governor’s proposal to unfreeze charter school tuition will result in an additional cost of \$14.3 million to our district to bring our total projected charter school expense to \$87 million next year.

Finally, we request \$2 million to maintain our outstanding school nursing services in Rochester schools at the current level.

In summary, we deeply appreciate the State’s support of public education and the Rochester City School District.

To meet the education needs of Rochester children, we respectfully request a total of \$58 million more than the Governor has proposed in the State budget.

