

Frequently Asked Questions About the Facilities Modernization Plan

Last Updated: March 18, 2013

Since releasing a first draft of the comprehensive 12-year plan on Nov. 1, 2012, Superintendent Vargas has conducted more than 20 public meetings to answer questions and obtain input. This document contains answers to the most commonly asked questions from those meetings and his answer line.

Additional questions are welcome:

Email: SuperintendentsOffice@RCSDK12.org

Call: 262-8682

General Questions

Q1. Why is this major facilities upgrade being proposed now?

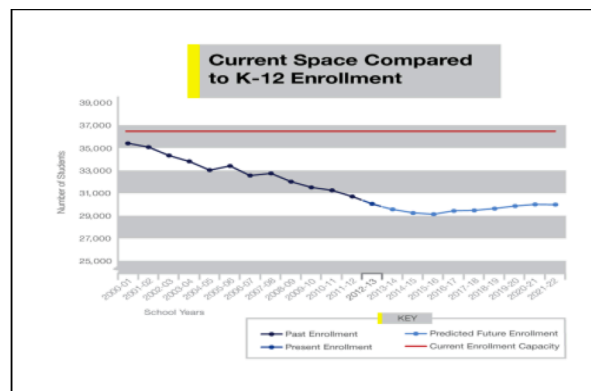
A1. Many of our children attend school in space that lacks the modern facilities and technology to optimize learning. Nearly half of our 51 school buildings are more than 75 years old; some are in poor condition and expensive to maintain. This plan takes advantage of state funding to improve outdated facilities over 12 years.

Q2. Why does the proposal recommend closing some buildings instead of renovating all of them?

A2. The District is maintaining space to serve more than 36,000 students, with a current K-12 enrollment of less than 30,000 that is projected to decline.

We are leasing space for seven student programs, despite the presence of district buildings nearby that are equally or better suited to the need.

As a result, the District spends millions of dollars each year to maintain excess space and outdated facilities. **The plan will “right-size” the District to improve teaching and learning by allocating resources more efficiently.**



Q3. How does this proposal affect the school renovation projects that have already started?

A3. It combines nine previously approved Phase 1 projects, which are all in design or construction, with 20 more projects in a Phase 2 program along with 31 proposed projects in future Phase 3 & 4 programs in a comprehensive, district-wide plan. The new projects would be implemented over the next 11 years.

Q4. What would be the impact of the plan be if it's approved?

A4. By 2024, all Rochester students will go to school in a modern, high-quality learning environment.

- 38 older buildings would be modernized and significantly renovated
- 9 newer buildings would receive less extensive renovations and routine maintenance
- 5 facilities would be vacated for other uses, but **no currently operating district building would close until 2015.**
- Two school programs would merge in one facility, and two programs would be discontinued.

Q5. What factors were used to decide which buildings should be closed?

A5. Recommendations on which buildings should be closed focused on the age and condition of the buildings. The need for space in the various zones was determined by matching the number of school seats in each of the District's three zones to enrollment needs at each grade level. The plan analyzes feeder patterns (where students from different neighborhoods currently attend school) plus the costs of modernizing and maintaining current facilities. The Superintendent combined the analysis of facility conditions and space needs with program performance in a plan designed to optimize student achievement and use of space.

Q6. What is the difference between a school facility and a school program?

A6. A school facility is a building owned by the City and used by the District for educational purposes. A program is the people and curriculum that make up a school – groups of students at various grade levels, along with the teachers, principal and staff responsible for educating them. Some Rochester schools have a single program and facility with the same name, some of our facilities house multiple programs, and some programs are housed in a facility with a different name.

Q7. Why include changes to programs and facilities, instead of just offering a plan to improve buildings?

A7. It would be unfair to students to update facilities without considering the status of programs housed there, or to adjust programs without considering the District's space needs and available facilities. In addition, state law requires the District to do both.

- On the facilities side, the state has acknowledged our need to modernize buildings and pledged funds to pay for most of the work. But the District must demonstrate the educational benefit of each project and the need for space to obtain the funding.
- On the program side, 55 of the District's 60 programs are on state lists of underperforming schools that must demonstrate improvement. Twenty-three of these are "Priority" schools requiring immediate and dramatic change.

Questions About Impact on Families and Neighborhoods

Q8. Was support for neighborhood schools a consideration?

A8. Absolutely. The facility plan is part of a District strategy to make the nearest elementary or secondary school the most appealing choice for every Rochester family. Elements of the strategy include:

- A rigorous curriculum for every student based on the Common Core adopted by New York and 45 other states
- An extended day to increase instructional time and meet other student needs
- Art, music, physical education and extra-curricular activities in every school
- Sports for junior-high and high-school students
- Safe, comfortable and modern learning environments

With the goal of attractive neighborhood schools in mind, the plan recognizes that the District does not need and the state will not fund the same number of schools given our declining enrollment. It also supports choice, by continuing or expanding successful programs that meet a variety of student needs.

Q9. Won't the disruption of renovations and closures hurt student achievement in the short term?

A9. The District is making every effort to minimize disruption for students and families. Where extensive renovations are required, most programs can be relocated to temporary "swing space" without a negative impact on performance, thanks to the cooperation of our staff and students. Use of swing space will continue for extensive renovations, and where possible, work will be completed in summer projects or without relocating students. By taking a 12-year approach, future moves, facility closures, and construction scheduling can be well planned to minimize disruptions.

Q10. Why does the plan propose completing many projects in two or three phases, instead of all at once?

A10. The goal for financing the projects is to maximize support from the state legislature. The state will fund up to 98 percent of modernization costs, but to achieve that many of the renovations have to be completed in phases, which prevents projects from exceeding the Maximum Cost Allowance for individual buildings and spreads requests across multiple years.

Q11. My child attends a school that will close or host a different program. What are my options?

A11. When facilities close, your child will be guaranteed space in a different school near your home, or you can apply to one of the District's zone-wide or city-wide school programs. When programs change, your child is guaranteed space in the facility they currently attend if you live within a half-mile. We will provide individualized placement services for every family affected by facility or program closures.

Q12. I work at a school that will be closing. What are my options?

A12. Staff members will use the voluntary transfer process and be eligible to participate in Round 1b during Transfer Day.

Q13. What will happen to buildings that are closing?

A13. We will work to minimize the impact on all residents of affected neighborhoods. The District has an excellent track record of dealing with the City, which owns our buildings, and with neighborhood partners on potential use and redevelopment options. Examples of such retrofitted school buildings that have actually increased the value of nearby properties include the former Josh Lofton High School and Ellwanger-Barry School No. 24.

Process Questions

Q14. Who approves the plan?

A14. The plan must be approved by the Rochester Board of Education. For the projects to move forward, the state must pass legislation to fund phases two, three and four.

Q15. What is the timeline?

A15. The Superintendent submitted a first draft of the plan on Nov. 1, 2012 and a final draft on March 14, 2013, after receiving input at more than 20 public and school-based events. If the Board of Education approves the program changes and facility closures described in the plan, the District will work with City officials to get state legislation authorizing the Phase 2 projects and appropriating funds for them. The District hopes that this legislation will be approved in 2013 to keep the modernizations moving forward.

Q16. When will the plan be final?

A16. Though the timeline envisions approval in March 2013, this plan like its predecessor will be a living document. It will need to be continuously adjusted as educational requirements and the District's space needs change.

Q17. What is the Rochester Joint Schools Construction Board?

A17. The RJSCB is a seven-member organization that oversees the Facilities Modernization Plan, with members appointed by the Superintendent and the Mayor. It was created by the 2007 state law that authorized the district-wide modernization effort. The board hired expert consultants to assess all District facilities and make modernization recommendations.

Q18. How does the RJSCB work with the District?

A18. RJSCB hired an executive director (Tom Renauto, formerly a senior project manager with LP Ciminelli construction firm), program manager (Tom Rog er of Gilbane Building Company) and other expert consultants who led the facilities review and planning process. They provide guidance to District staff on how best to modernize facilities, and serve as an ongoing resource to help match the renovation projects to educational program needs.

Q19. Why didn't the Superintendent adopt one of the RJSCB modernization options exactly as presented?

A19. The November 1, 2012 report was issued as a draft allowing for District and public input. The Superintendent's job is to match the facility improvements to the educational needs of the District and the number one priority of improving student achievement. Dr. Vargas and his leadership team adjusted one of the plans recommended by the experts to match program needs.

Q20. Why is the plan being reviewed in March 2013 different than one presented on Nov. 1, 2012?

A20. The Nov. 1 draft was a starting point. It has been revised based on discussions with state officials about funding availability, input from public meetings and continued facilities analysis by expert consultants. If the plan is approved by the Board of Education in March, the District will work aggressively to obtain funding for Phase 2 projects. But as the plan moves forward over the next 11 years, some details will continue to be adjusted to match changing educational requirements and District needs.

Q21. Why weren't parents and neighborhood groups involved in creating the draft?

A21. The task force that participated in the development of the plan included parent and neighborhood representatives along with District staff and teachers. In addition, the current draft is based on a previous plan approved by the Board of Education in 2010 after numerous public meetings, including four community dialogues led by the RJSCB that helped to shape the plan. Soon after becoming permanent Superintendent in July 2012, Dr. Vargas determined that it was important to revise the plan or risk losing state funds. He worked with the RJSCB to update the recommendations and released a new draft last November, scheduling more than 20 public meetings and creating a dedicated answer line to solicit public input. The Board of Education also scheduled public meetings. This process supports both transparency and a need to act relatively quickly to move the district's modernization forward.

Financing questions

Q22. How can the District afford this in a time of budget deficits?

A22. The state will fund up to 98 percent of project costs. Many recommendations have been adjusted to maximize the potential for state funding approval, minimizing the need to use other District funds.

Q23. How do you determine which projects can be funded?

A23. The 2007 legislation established guidelines for the types of projects that would be covered. Each phase of the program must be approved by additional state legislation. The District is working with our local delegation and the New York State Education Department to create proposals that will qualify for the maximum state aid including consideration of possible replacement building projects.

Q24. Isn't it sometimes cheaper to build a new school than modernize an old one?

A24. The 2007 legislation supports renovations of current facilities rather than brand-new or building replacement construction. Under the new legislation for Phase 2, there may be some flexibility that could support a new school if the District can demonstrate that the space is required and a new building is the most cost-effective way to benefit students educationally. We are exploring that option in the District's south and northwest zones, where there are older facilities that are expensive to maintain and challenging to renovate, along with a need for capacity.

Q25. Has the District increased modernization costs by failing to maintain certain buildings?

A25. The District's maintenance budget has historically been low based on industry standards for maintaining public-use buildings. It is very difficult to keep up with basic infrastructure needs of many District buildings due to their age. The District's facilities team has applied resources where they are most needed and ensured that each building gets focused attention on a rotating basis. The modernization program is designed to address deferred maintenance issues as well as updating the educational capabilities of the facilities.

School-specific Questions

Q26. Why did the plan recommend potentially closing two schools in the 19th Ward neighborhood?

A26. The 19th Ward has three schools that are between 96 and 102 years old -- School 10, located in Facility 37 at 353 Congress Ave., School 16 at 321 Post Ave., and School 44 at 820 Chili Ave. They are all impressive buildings with a rich history, but each is expensive to maintain and none is well suited to today's educational needs. All three require heavy infrastructure upgrades and are on sites that lack the space to meet current standards. The District looked at options that include constructing replacement building(s), modernizing one or two of the current facilities, and retiring one or two of the current facilities over time.

Q27. Why does the final draft call for renovating School 16?

A27. The modernization plan must balance many different needs—improving educational environments for children, using District space more efficiently, meeting State Education Department requirements for program improvement, and minimizing disruption for families and neighborhoods. The public input helped to identify ways to balance those needs, and a key result was the decision to recommend renovating School No. 16 instead of retiring the facility, which Dr. Vargas also considered.

- Q28. Why is the School 30 program being discontinued next year, with a building that's in good shape?**
- A28. Unfortunately, School 30 has been the District's lowest-performing school program for more than 10 years. It has been designated a Priority School by the New York State Education Department, which requires the Superintendent either to close the school program or make one of three other prescribed program changes. Moving School 54 from leased space into the School 30 facility will immediately introduce a better-performing program into the neighborhood, and families who live within a half-mile of the school will be guaranteed a space. This change will also improve the instructional space for School 54 families and lower the use of District funds to lease space.
- Q29. Many people see improvements in School 30 because of the Leader In Me program and a new acting principal. Can't these changes satisfy the state requirements?**
- A29. The Superintendent has said often that he is proud of the hard work being done by students and staff at School 30 to improve student achievement. Unfortunately, the changes do not meet state requirements for improving Priority schools and have not boosted performance enough to take School 30 off the list. This led the Superintendent to the painful decision that the School 30 program should be closed. He hopes the students and staff will continue their good work to boost achievement this year, and in future years as part of a different District program.
- Q30. What is the reason for merging the School 10 and School 1 programs in the School 1 facility?**
- A30. Martin B, Anderson School No. 1 has one of the District's largest elementary school sites, and attracts families from throughout the District's Southern Zone. Dr. Walter Cooper Academy School No. 10 offers an Expeditionary Learning program and attracts families from across the City. The plan calls for expanding and modernizing the School 1 facility by 2015, then making it the home school for students currently at School 10, which would merge with the current School 1 program into one Expeditionary Learning School, called the Dr. Walter Cooper Academy and serving students from Pre-kindergarten through grade 6. This will expand a strong program for city families, free up the School 10 facility as swing space while other schools are modernized, and eventually allow the building, which opened in 1916, to be closed in 2020.