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# Students' mental health must take priority in pandemic recovery efforts

By **SAMRA BROUK** and **DR. LESLI MYERS-SMALL**

New York State recently reached a sobering milestone: Just over one year ago a state of emergency was declared as the number of COVID-19 cases in the state began to climb. While we have, thankfully, made significant strides in our fight against the virus over the last year — including the development and distribution of life-saving vaccines — the mental health impacts of living through this pandemic will reverberate for years to come. Our children may bear the worst of that burden, having lost more than a year of their young lives to a deadly, worldwide virus that changed our way of life.

The enormous challenge of providing for students while lacking the essential funding and resources to pivot and innovate under unprecedented circumstances has been trying for us all. Many families lacked reliable internet access, which proved to be a barrier for remote learning and social connectivity, including access to virtual visits with mental health professionals. We are collaborating to ensure a meaningful investment from New York State in our schools to support the social-emotional needs of Rochester City School District students.

At a recent virtual town hall on the mental health needs of students in Monroe and Ontario counties, we heard harrowing stories about students' experiences during the pandemic. Ranging in age from middle school to college, students spoke about the heavy workloads they were facing as they adjusted to virtual learning and being isolated from friends, teachers, and a supportive school community.



Brouk



Myers-Small

## GUEST OPINION

While staff, teachers and school administrators have worked tirelessly to ensure a smooth transition to virtual learning and provide a quality education for all students, their social-emotional needs must be paramount. These experiences are echoed by

students, parents, and school communities everywhere. RCSD students face disproportionately high poverty rates while also dealing with high-profile local and national racial/social justice issues, which exacerbate their trauma. In an effort to address the mental health, behavioral, and emotional needs that many of our students are experiencing, the District's Student Support Services team has been providing counseling, resources, and referrals. Support may include individual, group or classroom grief counseling, and community outreach services.

The next generation is suffering, and as educators and state leaders, we must work together to help heal our children. The safety and the social-emotional well-being of students is a top priority in the RCSD. We have been working together to educate our local and state delegation to prioritize addressing mental health in our schools and are advocating for increased funding to ensure proper and ongoing care is provided to support strong, healthy, and high-achieving scholars.

*Samra Brouk is a New York State Senator representing the 55th district of the New York State Senate, based in Rochester and its eastern suburbs.*

*Dr. Lesli Myers-Small is the superintendent of the Rochester City School District.*

### MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION

Continued from page 1

Morgan Hopkins, director of the Hemp & Cannabis Services practice at DeJoy, Knauf & Blood LLP, says the legislation could have a number of positive benefits for the Rochester region.



Hopkins

"In general, this has the potential to be a really great program," Hopkins says. "There are tremendous opportunities for the Greater Rochester area and the rest of the state."

Hopkins assists companies interested in working in the hemp and cannabis arena, getting them up to date on regulations and helping them get positioned in the marketplace.

Hopkins initially had some concerns about whether the legislation would ultimately be a cash grab for the state, with some earlier versions including a tax of up to 50 percent, which, she says, which would not be feasible for consumers.

The approved bill calls for a 13 percent tax — which includes a nine percent state tax and four percent local tax — is more feasible, she notes.

The legislation also provides opportunities for new technologies related to dispensing, as well as safety and efficacy, which would give companies an opportunity for innovation. Another benefit is the way the funds would be allocated, with a focus on social justice and socioeconomic initiatives, she notes.

Moving forward, conversations will be focused on how the industry is regulated, she says, noting there will be new

due diligence companies will have to undergo.

The opportunities are many, she says, from growers and retailers to ancillary businesses, such as commercial printers who may handle a company's labeling to commercial real estate developers who have vacant industrial space that could be used.

Rochester is an entrepreneurial city, with business leaders ready to enter what will likely be a burgeoning industry, she notes, adding city leaders have also been supportive of the measure.

"Rochester is hungry and ready to get started," she says.

Tristan Hujer, a partner at Phillips Lytle LLP, believes the opportunities for legalized recreational marijuana will be similar to those in place in the hemp and CBD industry, with companies able to get involved in the industry at any point in the supply chain.



Hujer

Hujer has represented growers, distributors and other businesses in the legal-cannabis industries.

He also believes the opportunities are numerous, from growing the seeds and harvesting and processing the plants to packaging products and adding retail establishments including dispensaries and social clubs.

Hujer says there are opportunities beyond recreational marijuana use, noting the marijuana leaves could be harvested and used in products, as well.

Among the challenges is having enough capital to launch a business in the industry, he says.

"It's not going to be inexpensive to get into the industry and be successful," Hujer says.

The industry will likely favor companies who are properly capitalized, have a robust business plan and have either studied the businesses operating in other states where recreational use is already legal, or have a role in those operations already, he adds.

Hujer is optimistic about the industry prospects in New York.

He believes the region is well positioned for growth, given its ample farmland, which is in close proximity to larger urban areas, including Rochester, Buffalo and Niagara Falls. Another asset for the region is its availability of office and manufacturing space, he adds.

Meaghan Feenan, an associate with Harris Beach PLLC, agrees the Rochester area is well positioned to capitalize on the recreational marijuana industry, with city leaders already looking at how the revenue stream could help at-risk communities.

Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren, for example, recently spoke of using a portion of such funds for a possible reparations program for communities that have been most affected by the criminalization of marijuana.

"The Rochester community has already been thinking about this," Feenan says.

In addition, the Finger Lakes region has a large share of hemp processors and growers which could translate to the recreational marijuana space, she notes.



Feenan