



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

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Presented By:  
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## **Introduction**

Good afternoon. My name is Bolgen Vargas, and I testified last year as Interim Superintendent of the Rochester City School District. Today it is my privilege to appear as Rochester's permanent Superintendent.

I thank the committees for the opportunity to speak here today. Moreover, I would like to thank you—along with Gov. Cuomo, and your colleagues in the Assembly and Senate—for your ongoing support of public education.

I would especially like to thank Commissioner King, who testified earlier, and his team at the State Education Department. They have been a tremendous source of advice, expertise and financial support as we work to transform Rochester schools. We appreciate their role of NYSED as collaborators and not just regulators.

With the support of the education department, our teachers, and the entire Rochester community, our District is working aggressively to improve student achievement in Rochester. There are two critical elements of our strategy I want to mention today.

One is reading, which is an essential gateway to success for our children. If students learn to read by the third grade, they can read to learn through high school and college and have successful careers. We have pledged to get 90 percent of Rochester third graders reading at grade level to transform our District. We need state help to achieve this goal quickly.

Additionally, next year we will fully implement a core instructional program for all students. It is based on the state's common core curriculum, and sets higher expectations for our children.

I am confident that our students can meet the high expectations. But to do that, we need to give them **time**—more instructional time in the classroom and time for other supports taken for granted in suburban schools. The Governor knows this, and I applaud his budget proposals to support expanded learning. In my statement to the media, I said that we were thrilled to see how closely the Governor’s proposal aligns with the priorities of Rochester schools.

I have three requests that would build on the Governor’s proposal and provide critical help that Rochester students need.

- Funding for more reading teachers is one. We are grateful to the state for making education compulsory at age 5, which supports our focus on reading. Rochester has long offered full-day Kindergarten to our families. But we believe that more support is needed if students are going to read by grade 3, and we would like to add reading teachers at these K-3 grade levels.
- Expanded learning is a second area where we need more help. Thanks to a planning grant from the Ford Foundation, Rochester schools are ready, willing and able to adopt expanded schedules next year. The Governor has proposed \$20 million in grants for extended learning, and we are eager to compete. If this funding can be expanded further, we could help thousands more students to meet higher standards.
- My third request is revenue neutral. It is to support neighborhood schools with a more flexible policy on transportation aid. Currently, the state pays for students who travel more than 1.5 miles to school. If Rochester had the flexibility to bus students less than 1.5 miles, more families will choose neighborhood schools, without increasing our transportation budget.

As you consider the state’s education budget, I ask you to understand that for districts like Rochester, **money is time** – time for more classroom learning and extra support that our students desperately need.

## **Challenges Facing Rochester Students**

First, some brief facts about the Rochester district.

- We have 60 schools that educate just over 29,000 K-to-12 students, with Universal Pre-K programs serving 1,900 children. We have spots for all eligible families in UPK, and 90 percent take advantage of them.
- Eighty-eight percent of our students qualify for free or reduced price lunches. This year, we took advantage of the community eligibility option to provide free lunches for all students.
- Eighteen percent of our students have special needs, and slightly more than ten percent have limited English proficiency. There are 81 different languages being spoken at home.

The challenges these numbers represent have created an urgent need to transform our district.

- Rochester is a Focus District with 24 Priority Schools that require immediate improvement plans, and 30 Focus Schools where major changes are required.
- We have lost 20 percent of our enrollment since 1989, with an increasing number choosing charter schools.
- Our graduation rate is under 50 percent, with a 30 percent cohort dropout rate after four years.
- We have the lowest test scores in the state, with approximately 20 percent of our students reading at grade level.

Common sense tells you that Rochester students need time to catch up. Educational research tells us the same thing. Our students need more time in pre-Kindergarten to get the basics of learning that suburban families take for granted. They need more time in the classroom to reach grade level in their subjects. And they need extra services in their

schools to deal with the social, psychological and emotional challenges that are a fact of life for our families.

Unfortunately, we cannot afford to give them more time. In fact, children in Rochester schools get less instructional time than any other students in our County. That is why we need your help.

### **Our Plan to Transform the District**

It is very hard for me to share the poor student achievement statistics from our District. The performance of Rochester schools has been far too low, for far too long.

Let me tell you what we are doing now that is different.

First, we have a new leadership team. Six of the seven members of my executive cabinet have come from outside the District in the past seven months. They are accomplished leaders in their respective areas who share my passion for helping Rochester students. Together, we bring a fresh perspective and a sense of urgency to the task of transforming our District.

Next, we are keeping score with data tracking systems that are second to none. Every teacher and administrator now has a dashboard that tracks the performance measures they need, from daily attendance to achievement scores to individual homework assignments. We are ensuring that this data is accurate, even when it makes our District look farther behind.

The data is helping to create a culture of accountability. As a District, we have identified five key goals, and we track our progress against 29 measurable targets. I visit schools regularly to ask principals and teachers what their data shows. More important, I ask every administrator how they are using data to drive decisions and make changes.

The state is helping with accountability through the APPR process. Rochester was one of the first of the Big 5 Districts to implement APPR. The District had an approved plan by September 1 and it's in full implementation. We intend to make it work to improve teacher performance and student achievement.

Attendance is another part of our strategy to transform the District. Students can't learn if they don't go to school, and teachers can't be accountable for the performance of students who aren't there. We have acknowledged this in our implementation of APPR.

To improve attendance, Rochester is highlighting truancy as a community challenge. Every month we have reach-out events, where 50 to 100 leaders from the District and the community at large, knock on the doors of chronically absent students. Sometimes, we discover that families have moved and we're able to improve our data. Other times, we connect with parents and find solutions to get their children back in school. We also have a new program to recognize families for high attendance.

As part of Rochester's transformation, we are adopting a curriculum that is intentionally NOT new. Next year, we will fully implement a core instructional program based on the state's common core curriculum.

I am pleased to say that Rochester teachers are ready, and many welcome the challenge. But they will need extra time to help their students achieve at grade-level expectations.

Along with the core curriculum, we are implementing a new master schedule across the District. This replaces a system where scheduling was done at the building level, which meant that course offerings were not always consistent at different schools.

I should be clear that adopting a master schedule and core curriculum does not mean a cookie-cutter education. Our principals and teachers will help students learn in the way that best engages them. That might be traditional classroom presentation; it might be expeditionary learning, or a career and technical approach. But all Rochester students will learn the same concepts and material at the same grade level, regardless of which school they attend. All students will be held to high standards.

I firmly believe that teaching core subjects is only half of the sound, basic education that every student deserves. That is why—despite a serious budget challenge—I have pledged to maintain art, music, physical education and extra-curricular activities in every school. Many of you know Anita Murphy, our Deputy Superintendent for Administration, who helped to roll out the core curriculum statewide as Associate Commissioner of Education. As Anita likes to say, **rigor** and **vigor** are both essential to engage our students and help them achieve.

As a final piece of our transformation, we are working aggressively to engage parents and the community. One example is our campaign to promote reading. Every student in Rochester knows that he, or she, should be reading outside school at least 30 minutes each day. Every parent of younger children knows that it is their responsibility to make sure reading happens at home. I am delighted to see our campaign catching on, with students and parents frequently approaching me to report on their reading at home.

With the help of community partners like Wegmans, we have a special program to promote reading over school breaks. Through RocRead, more than 8,000 students read a book over the recent holiday vacation and turned in a short assignment about it to their teachers.

These engagement efforts will play a critical role in achieving our goal to have 90 percent of third graders reading at grade level. But reading is only one area in which the Rochester community is engaged

in helping our students. My team has reached out to a wide range of groups, and individuals, for help with a variety of needs.

I am humbled to tell you that we almost never hear the word “no” when asking for community help. In many cases, we receive more than we requested. Our Board President, who has been involved with Rochester schools for decades, tells me that community support has never been stronger than it is today.

In short, I believe that all the right forces are aligned for Rochester students to succeed.

Time is the essential resource we need to make this transformation work. I’m not referring to the years it will take to achieve our goals. We need more instructional time, every day, to help students achieve. Students need more time outside the classroom to engage in extra-curricular activities and get other support.

### **Budgeting to Support Our Priorities**

Many of you know Bill Ansbro, our Chief Financial Officer, who helped three different mayors manage Rochester City finances over the past 25 years. Bill is helping us to identify efficiencies within the budget, and to instill a greater discipline to the process. We intend to abolish the annual budget drama that leaves our families and staff worried and wondering, as school dismisses for the summer, where they will be at the beginning of the next school year.

As part of our disciplined process, we presented a budget projection to our board six weeks ago. It forecast a \$50.2 million gap for the next school year. As I said then, and will repeat today, that presents us with a serious problem. But we do not view it as a crisis. We are determined to close the gap by finding efficiencies wherever possible. We will make every decision based on what is best for students. That is



why I am insisting that we continue to offer art, music, P.E. and extra-curricular activities in every school.

As we have analyzed the impact of the Governor's proposal, Rochester City Schools have much to be pleased about. The total for Foundation, Formula and Building aid that Governor Cuomo proposed were collectively within 1 percent of our projections. The total increase for Rochester in these categories is 5.2 percent, which includes a spike in building aid to support our Facilities Modernization Plan. Any increase you can provide will help Rochester to avoid extremely difficult cuts next year, but we appreciate that there are needs across the state.

The pension smoothing proposal was an innovative idea that we did not expect to see and appreciate being able to consider. It could provide significant near-term relief, reducing our gap for next year by \$16 million dollars. It is tempting for me to simply say, "We'll take it!" But fiscal discipline requires us to assess the long-term impact before making a decision.

Finally, we were delighted to see the Governor embrace the "New New York" Reform agenda, which aligns his budget proposal with our district's priorities. We are eager to compete for grants that support full-day Pre-K, extended learning and community schools. We appreciate that the \$75 million for these grants is in addition to the Foundation and Formula aid. It could spell additional money that we will use to give Rochester students the extra time they desperately need.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to express the needs of the children in my district.