



*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**

Thank you for the honor of testifying before you today. My name is Linda Cimusz, and I represent the Rochester City School District as Interim Superintendent. I am a lifelong educator who started as a classroom teacher and served as a building principal at the elementary, middle and high school levels. I have held District leadership positions in Buffalo, Syracuse, and Williamsville New York. I also served as a deputy education commissioner in the state of Texas in the early 1990s.

I came to Rochester at the request of Dan Lowengard, whom many of you know was Superintendent of the Utica and Syracuse City School districts for many years. The Rochester Board of Education hired Mr. Lowengard last fall to serve as Interim Superintendent beginning this month, and he brought me in to help. Unfortunately, a health issue has prevented Mr. Lowengard from continuing his service to Rochester, and I was asked to step in as Interim two weeks ago while the Board continues its search for a long-term Superintendent.

My reason for sharing that background is that it's relevant to my message today.

- As a career educator with experience in other urban districts, my early assessment is that Rochester schools are taking the right steps to improve student achievement. The District is headed in a positive direction.
- As an interim leader I assure you that the Board of Education intends to maintain the priorities and strategies that are working to benefit Rochester children. Our team is doing everything we can to advance the district's progress during the transition.
- I also have learned that financial management is a strength of the Rochester City School District. The district has improved financial stability over the past four years while increasing services to students. We intend to remain good stewards of taxpayer money and to justify our respectful request for additional state investment.

## **State Support for Rochester Students**

Before providing more detail on our District's priorities and needs, I would like to thank the committees—along with Governor Cuomo, our local delegation and your colleagues in the Assembly and Senate—for your ongoing support of public education.

We appreciate the Community Schools Aid proposed in the Governor's budget to address unique challenges faced by urban districts. This funding will help Rochester receivership

schools to maintain important educational programs, some of which are funded by grants that will expire this year. We ask that the legislature support the Governor's full proposal for Community Schools Aid.

I would especially like to thank you for supporting full-day Pre-Kindergarten, in which I am a passionate believer. Rochester Pre-K programs serve 95 percent of the city's eligible four-year-olds, and this is the second school year in which more than 90 percent attend full-day programs. On January 4<sup>th</sup> we began serving more than 650 **three**-year-olds in full-day Pre-Kindergarten, thanks to an \$11.9 million expansion grant, the largest in the state. We plan to serve more than 1,000 three-year-olds in full-day Pre-Kindergarten in the next school year; the District's ultimate goal is to offer full-day Pre-K to every three- and four-year-old in the city. We appreciate Governor Cuomo's newly proposed initiative to increase Pre-K for three-year-olds, which will help us to achieve that goal. Early education is an essential component of our strategy to help Rochester students to read on grade level by third grade. Education research and my career experience show that no strategy benefits urban children more than a strong focus on early literacy.

On behalf of the Rochester Board of Education I also want to thank the legislature and Governor for enacting Phase 2 of our Facilities Modernization Plan. Ten Rochester schools have been modernized or have renovations underway as part of Phase 1. We appreciate the support of our local delegation and other state leaders in authorizing up to \$435 million to continue modernizing Rochester schools in Phase 2. Last night we conducted the second of four public meetings to gather input for our updated Phase 2 modernization plan. While planning to create better learning environments in many of our buildings, the Board of Education has also closed four schools in the past four years and authorized closure of at least two more in the next four years. This illustrates my point that the Rochester district is a good steward of taxpayer dollars. While using state aid to modernize facilities, the district is making the difficult decisions required to right-size its facility footprint.

### **District Action Plan**

I have attached to my written testimony a copy of the District's [Action Plan](#) to improve student achievement from 2014 to 2018. It is based on the theory that Rochester children can and will succeed if we mitigate poverty by giving them the extra time and support they need.

Under this plan the District has identified three academic priorities—helping Rochester students to read on grade level by third grade; providing them more and better learning time; and delivering excellent instruction. Along with strategies to support each of these academic goals, the plan defines actions to improve student attendance and school climate. There are major community initiatives underway to achieve both of these objectives by engaging students, families and community partners.

The plan calls for colleges or other outside organizations to lead individual schools, and this year the University of Rochester began managing East High—the district’s largest school—as an Educational Partnership Organization. Career and technical education is a component of the plan being realized at Edison Tech high school, which opened this year as a newly unified school with a new leadership team and career pathways developed in collaboration with the Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council.

Effective and efficient allocation of resources is the District’s number two priority, which reflects the close relationship between resources and achievement. Over the past four years, the District has deliberately and transparently shifted more than \$60 million in resources away from functions that do not directly benefit students toward services and supports that will help them succeed.

- Hiring significantly more classroom teachers, social workers, and librarians
- Adding instructional time through universal full-day Pre-K, 13 expanded learning schools and summer learning opportunities for 12,500 students last July and August.
- Supporting major increases in art, music and sports programs

- Increasing the number of reading teachers in schools from zero in 2012 to more than 60 today
- Distributing hundreds of thousands of books for students to take home each year

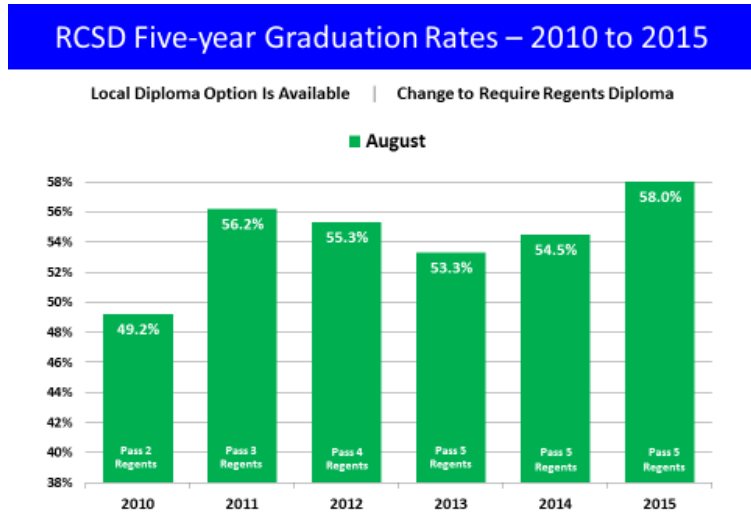


20

- Providing other resources that support students and schools

These actions are beginning to pay a return on investment for Rochester students. Full-day Pre-K and the expanded-learning schedules at elementary schools are popular with our families. School attendance increased significantly in elementary grades—1,104 fewer elementary students were chronically absent in 2014-15 compared to the previous year.

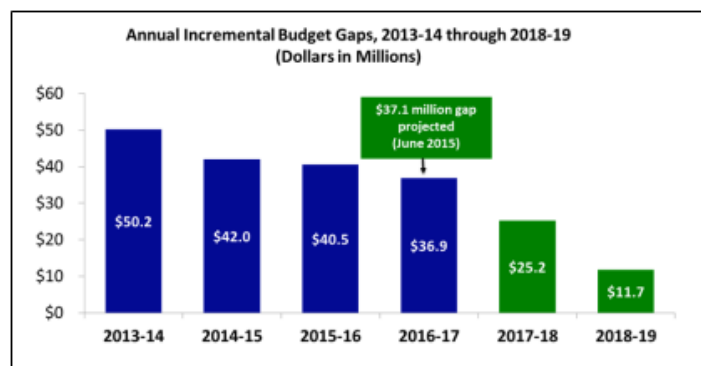
Graduation rates, while far too low, are on the increase. Data released by the state last month show that Rochester’s five-year graduation rate in 2015 was 58 percent. That’s a 3.5 percent increase compared to the previous year and the highest rate in six years. The four-year graduation rate for students with disabilities increased 2.1%



compared to the previous year, continuing a four-year improvement trend from 18.7% in 2012 to 28.8% in 2015. The graduation rate for students with limited English proficiency increased 3.1% compared to 2014, though it remains too low at 20.6%.

We are focused on improving both four- and five-year graduation rates. A high-school diploma is no less valuable if it takes a student extra time to meet higher standards. We want to encourage and applaud their perseverance.

At the same time it has increased investment in student achievement, the Rochester City School District has



reduced its structural budget gap by more than 25 percent—from more than \$50 million three years ago to a projected \$36.9 million in 2016-17. The District has identified more than \$60 million in budget efficiencies over the past four years and shifted resources to increase direct student support.

I am working closely with the Board of Education, our Deputy Superintendents, new Chief Financial Officer Lauren Poehlman and the District financial team to continue the current path—increased investment in students while reducing annual budget gaps and achieving long-term financial stability over time.

### **Our 2016-17 Budget Challenge**

Our district faces significant challenges to meet growing costs for employee compensation and for the expansion of charter schools, which currently educate 14 percent of Rochester students. Last month, our Board of Education reviewed a projected \$41.9 million budget challenge in 2016-17. This includes a \$36.9 million budget gap driven by the expansion of charter schools, contractual salary increases and employee benefit costs.

While closing this \$36.9 million gap, we intend to shift an additional \$5 million in resources to improve student achievement. Our leadership team is meeting with school Principals this week to discuss how best to allocate that investment. Some of the ideas we are discussing include staff additions at certain secondary schools, increasing the number of summer jobs the District funds for our students, and equipment purchases to improve art, music, and sports opportunities for our students. Dr. Christiana Otuwa, our Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning, also is leading a comprehensive review of alternative school programs—those serving students who are not experiencing success in a traditional school environment for a variety of reasons.

### **Funding Request to State**

As we thank you for continued strong support of Rochester schools through the Community Schools Aid program, there are three specific areas in which we must request additional help—receivership schools, student transportation, and school nursing services.

I will address the receivership issue first. For background purposes I should explain that during the 2014-15 school year I served as Chief Academic Officer of the Buffalo Public Schools. In that capacity I oversaw initial implementation of the Education Transformation Act of 2015, better known as the receivership law. As committee members know well, the law requires certain low-performing schools to meet improvement targets within one or two years. Superintendents are given some extra unilateral authority as a receiver to implement changes in

these schools, and districts will be required to appoint outside receivers for schools that do not meet their targets.

As someone well versed in the law's requirements, I am impressed with the work Rochester schools are doing to help struggling schools improve rapidly. All of Rochester's 14 receivership schools have a state-approved improvement plan in place, which includes the EPO agreement with the University of Rochester at East High School. All deadlines for forming community engagement teams, conducting hearings and developing the plans have been met. Eight of the nine receivership schools that serve elementary students had met the requirement for additional learning time before the new law took effect. New Principals have been appointed at 10 of the 14 schools within the past two school years.

In short, I can assure you that the Rochester City School District is taking the receivership law seriously and working aggressively to help struggling schools improve. However, the new law's mandates will add to our budget challenge if we do not receive additional help. This year, Rochester's four schools on the "persistently struggling" list received state aid to boost their ability to meet specified targets. The 10 Rochester schools classified as "struggling" have similar needs to add resources that support their students, especially those that no longer receive School Improvement Grant support. Our struggling schools would benefit from receivership aid in 2016-17 applied using the same funding formula used to support the persistently struggling schools.

In addition, we respectfully request additional state help to address rising transportation costs. We would like to fund a pilot project beginning next year that would enable our district to provide universal transportation, which we believe will reduce transportation costs over time while supporting neighborhood schools.

Currently, the state pays 90 percent of transportation costs for students, but only if they travel more than 1.5 miles to school. This policy provides an incentive for parents to enroll their children in schools outside their neighborhoods. During the current school year, only 17 percent of Rochester elementary-school students on average attend their neighborhood school. Only 14 percent on average attend the K-to-8 school in their neighborhood. If Rochester had flexibility to bus students less than 1.5 miles, more families would choose neighborhood schools.

The Rochester pilot project, being led by Deputy Superintendent for Administration Adele Bovard, would provide universal transportation to students in all of our district's

elementary and K-to-8 schools next year. We would expand it to secondary schools in the following year, allowing every student to receive transportation to the school that is closest to home if they want it.

The pilot project would support the Safe Neighborhoods objective of the Rochester Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative. As the percentage of neighborhood students increases in each school, routing patterns become more efficient and we believe that rising transportation costs will be reduced over time. Our team is analyzing data now and will follow up with a formal funding request in the near future. We would appreciate your support in our effort to make neighborhood schools the rule rather than the exception for most Rochester families.

Finally, I would like to request \$2 million to maintain school nursing services in Rochester schools at the current level. For the past two years the legislature has generously supported a request for \$1.2 million over the Governor's proposed budget for nursing services. This has allowed our district to maintain full-time staffing in the student health office of every Rochester city school with oversight by a registered nurse. Rising contractual and employee costs will increase the incremental cost of maintaining this service next year by \$800,000. Our school nurses play an exceptionally valuable role in helping our children stay healthy, and the demand for student health services is increasing each year. We respectfully request an additional \$2 million over the Governor's proposed budget to maintain nursing services for our students.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for supporting the students of the Rochester City School District. We intend to advance student achievement as we continue to drive efficiencies within the District budget. The additional funding we are requesting today would be used to meet specific costs associated with supporting receivership schools, strengthening neighborhood schools through improved transportation and maintaining school nursing services.

I appreciate the chance today to report on our efforts and express the needs of the children in Rochester schools. Thank you.