

## **RCSD moves forward on neighborhood schools idea**

### **Schools**

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The Rochester City School District said earlier this year it would wait until 2018 to figure out how to implement a more neighborhood-based school selection system. In the meantime, though, it is taking concrete steps toward the concept in two neighborhoods.

Last month, the school board approved a resolution that joined John James Audubon School 33, the largest elementary school in the city, and East High School, its Beechwood area neighbor. Students from the former will automatically be enrolled in the latter starting in sixth grade, unless their parents request otherwise.

That effectively trims the sixth-grade cohort from School 33, though the resolution says sixth-graders can stay there if they want. It also creates the first nonselective K-12 feeder system in the district.

School board member Liz Hallmark has been the leading advocate for neighborhood schools; it was her committee that presented a set of options to the administration earlier this year.

She voted against the School 33 resolution, though, believing it isn't well thought out.

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“This is kind of putting the cart before the horse, because we don't have a neighborhood school model at School 33 in the first place,” she said. “So this pipeline could end up piping in kids from all around the city and making the situation worse.” At Thursday's meeting, the school board will vote on a proposal that would turn Enrico Fermi School 17 into a neighborhood school.

The resolution does not specify how that would work, but Hallmark said she believes it is similar to the School 33 idea, where families around School 17 that don't participate in the selection process will be assigned to that school automatically. At least half of Rochester families don't participate in the school selection process, which has often been criticized as opaque and confusing. There is no clear policy right now regarding where those non-participating students wind up, but the evidence shows they are not preferentially placed near their homes. The most recent data, from January 2016, shows that fewer than one in five young Rochester children attends the primary school nearest their house.

Part of the issue is that transportation is only provided for schools more than 1.5 miles away. It's not clear whether or how the School 17 resolution would address that problem.

The district and city of Rochester have held School 17 up as a paragon of the neighborhood school model; the building has a wide suite of facilities and services for students and community members, including a recreation center and a health clinic. As of last year, though, only 22 percent of its students come from the surrounding JOSANA neighborhood.

In a written statement, Board President Van White said more deliberation will be required, even after the vote. "If we decide that it will be a positive and productive step forward, we will begin to move decisively ... in that direction," he said.

Before the district does a comprehensive study of implementing neighborhood schools, its first priority is to study how well its academic needs align with its billion-dollar capital improvement plan. Those considerations could have a major impact on how neighborhood schools get implemented.

"There's been a lot of pressure from the community to kind of speed that process up," Hallmark said. "(But) we set up a process to get the superintendent to do these studies, and I want to see them done properly, not hastily."



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**The city school board will vote on a proposal that would turn Enrico Fermi School 17 into a neighborhood school.**

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