

## **RCSD policy on absences now includes driving to homes**

**Justin Murphy**

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The Rochester City School District last week announced changes and reinforcements to the district's policy around notifying parents when students are absent, including a resource-intensive commitment to drive to children's houses if no one answers the phone.

Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams announced the following steps:

- Attendance must be taken within 15 minutes of the beginning of the day.
- Automated calls will go out to parents one hour after the day begins.
- If there is no answer, a person will make a phone call.
- If there is no answer, someone will drive to the house.
- Automated calls will be repeated three additional times throughout the day if the parents cannot be reached.

The changes come as a response to the death of School 12 student Trevyan Rowe, whose mother did not receive an automated call about his absence from school.

The new notification procedures would not have made a difference in his case, though, because his first-period teacher marked him present. That is a separate problem now under investigation by the state Education Department and Attorney General's office.

Immediately after Trevyan's death, Deane-Williams pledged to improve the notification system regardless of cost.

The additional steps of making a personal phone call and driving to the house, though, could potentially be extremely time- and resource-intensive.

According to the most recent state data, there are 26,687 students in RCSD with an average daily attendance of 88 percent, meaning about 3,200 students are absent on any given day.

If even 5 percent of those students' families don't answer the phone, that would mean 160 home visits each day throughout the city. Deane-Williams did not say who would be making those trips, or who would be responsible for calling when the automated calls go unanswered.

At the same time as last week's school board meeting, School 12 parents were meeting with a top administrator over their concerns about the school. Those complaints predate Trevyan's death but touch on several issues relevant to it.

In particular, parents have said the district rushed School 12's expansion from K-6 to K-8 and did not provide enough resources to make it successful. It is no coincidence, they believe, that a tragedy happened to a middle-school student rather than a younger one.

"We've had one thing after another piled on our school that we weren't ready for and weren't supported by the district for," one parent, Rachel Larson, said last month. "It's ridiculous we have to have such a tragedy to recognize this was a mistake from the beginning.

“If you put this many stresses on any building, this stuff is going to happen. And here it is.”

### **Frustration over automated calling**

School Chief Idonia Owens said the district is still talking with principals about how the changes might be implemented.

“Every building is different, and we want to respect that,” she said. “It’s still a work in progress.”

The district uses an automated calling system for a variety of notifications and some parents get tired of hearing it. Teachers and building administrators say that parents often ignore calls from the automated number; instead, teachers call parents from their personal cellphones when they need to speak with them.

The task is further complicated by the fact that about 9 percent of RCSD students are homeless at some point in the school year and likely would be more difficult to reach either by phone or in person. There are also hundreds of chronically absent students who almost never attend school.

Attorney General Eric Schneiderman was in Rochester last week and said his office is in “the very early stages” of the Trevyan Rowe investigation and hopes to be finished by the end of the school year.

“The parents and children here in Rochester need to know that their kids can go to school safely and they are being monitored and there are grown-ups looking out for them,” he said.

[JMURPHY7@Gannett.com](mailto:JMURPHY7@Gannett.com) *Includes reporting by staff writer Brian Sharp.*