

Special needs go unmet

RCSD

RCSD remains short-staffed, under-trained in special ed

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Three weeks into this school year, special education reviews and paperwork were backing up in Rochester schools after the district failed to adequately train administrators on a new, important set of responsibilities. Children with special needs weren't getting the services they needed and school psychologists were working overtime trying to keep things in place.

As has happened so many times in the past, the superintendent, Barbara Deane-Williams, said that she had heard the valid complaints and was already in the process of addressing them. "I agree the process could have been stronger," she said. "There should have been more attention on it, and it's something we'll strengthen in the future."

The first step in that strengthening process, Deane-Williams said, would be to solicit feedback from building administrators, asking them what they needed to know to do their jobs better. In an interview Sept. 22, she said that process was already underway.

In fact, it was not. In response to a Freedom of Information request from the *Democrat and Chronicle*, the district acknowledged this week that it had collected no written feedback whatsoever following the debacle of the first few weeks of September. What's more, earlier comments from administrators directly after the training showed they were far from comfortable with their weighty new responsibilities.

Special education chief Sandy Simpson said Tuesday she and other district leaders did collect information informally, and defended the district's direction in general.

"It may not be perfect, but it's going in the direction we want, and it's going well," she said.

However Dan DeMarle, a special education consultant who works with families in Rochester and elsewhere,

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GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO **"I want to respect the superintendent and I don't want to put blame on people, but this is going to take a lot more attention.It's a mess."** Tim Cliby

president of the Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester



Cliby



Barbara Deane-Williams, superintendent of Rochester City School District, indicated a process to respond to special education needs was underway but others say it's worse than ever. JAMIE GERMANO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER, FILE

said the process is worse than ever.

“We usually just go to mediation because (the meetings) are just useless,” he said Tuesday. “It’s getting worse and worse and worse.”

Both main labor units have filed protests, and

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say things are hardly better for students now than they were in August.

Good leadership, bad management

“This was good leadership but bad management,” Rochester Teachers’ Association president Adam Urbanski said. “I think (Deane-Williams) was actually trying to locate services for special ed kids at the school, but the implementation was absolutely horrendous. I don’t know anyone who would defend it.”

The meetings DeMarle refers to happen at least once a year and have a great impact on the future course for students with disabilities. They are called Committee on Special Education (CSE) meetings and include parents, teachers, administrators and specialists. They discuss the child’s previous progress and decide what sort of accommodations she’ll need in the coming year. CSE meetings are also where new disability classifications are determined.

The intended change in RCSD was a momentous one, moving the responsibility for running those meetings from central office to principals and assistant principals. At the same time, oversight of the process was centralized. In practice, that meant eliminating about 20 central office-based positions and re-assigning them into buildings as special education teacher coaches. And it meant school principals and assistant principals needed to learn how to run the CSE meetings, a crucially important and tightly regulated task. Training for administrators took place over the summer, but evidently did not suffice to equip them for the demanding job. When first discussing the problem in late September, Deane-Williams said the district

meetings that were delayed beyond the statutory limit.

Points to broader problem

When asked whether there has been improvement since the beginning of the school year, Tim Cliby, president of the Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester, answered: “Not much.” “The bottom line is, they eliminated 22 positions without harnessing any alternate way to do that work,” he said. “We really had to take advantage of (the summer) for training, and it just didn’t happen.” Another major problem has been difficulty in filling positions for special education teaching coaches. The plan called for 16 of them, but Simpson said there is only one currently in place. Of the 22 supervisory positions eliminated, meanwhile, the district has had to hire back six people to re-assume some of their work. This is far from the first stumble in special education, an area that neatly encapsulates the district’s greater problems with management and communication. It was under a consent decree for decades for failure to provide a sound education to students with disabilities, and has hardly done better since being released from that supervision. It has been under a host of state sanctions for several years. Following a 2015 *Democrat and Chronicle*

investigation into the district’s inequitable treatment of non-Englishspeaking students with disabilities, the district realized it had actually been under-counting those students by half. Earlier this year, a report from an outside expert said the system seemed to be built to guarantee failure for students. “It’s systemic malpractice,” DeMarle said. “It’s such a marked disparity between Rochester and every other district I deal with in western New York.” Simpson has been serving as interim special education chief and will step down at the end of December. The district likely will not have hired a permanent replacement by then, so another interim chief will be appointed in the meantime, Simpson said. Urbanski said he has heard fewer complaints from his union members over the last month; he and Cliby believe that is because school administrators are handling more work themselves. An

believed initially that the summer training had been effective.

“There were a lot of questions and requests for information but it looked like people had been satisfied with the pace,” she said. “When students returned is when the questions accelerated.”

In early August, the district collected questions and some posttraining feedback from building administrators. A document with those collected questions, obtained through a Freedom of Information request, showed the confusion was already obvious.

“Can we please have an outline (of) who is responsible for what? It is unclear,” one person wrote. The district responded: “Examples were provided.” “We still need clarification on who will be responsible for running the meetings,” someone else wrote. A third person said: “Show us how to write an IEP!” Simpson, the district special education leader, said she has seen great variance in how well the special education meetings are going in individual schools.

“Hindsight’s always 20/20, right?” she said. “We definitely could have done a better job with the implementation. ... (But) there’s been a lot of problem-solving and very positive results.” She also added that, at last count, the district has only 12 cases of CSE

RTA grievance into compensation associated with the new workload is being negotiated now, and ASAR has filed a similar complaint. “I want to respect the superintendent and I don’t want to put blame on people, but this is going to take a lot more attention,” Cliby said. “It’s a mess.”

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Barbara Deane-Williams, Rochester School District superintendent

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