

## WORST?

### Schools

#### RCSD among the most deficient districts in U.S. over last 20 years

#### WHY ARE ROCHESTER SCHOOLS AMERICA'S

**Justin Murphy** Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK “Maybe it’s a good thing,” Angela Rivera says. ■ Her children go to Kodak Park School 41, which she can almost see from her front yard on Desmond Street in northwest Rochester. The school is closing at the end of this year — forced into closure by the state for failure to make academic progress — and she doesn’t know what the future holds. ■ She loves the school and its principal, so much so that she has remained in the parent-teacher organization even after the president quit in disgust, leaving her as the only parent representative in a school of 510 students. ■ Her first-grader, though, came home with a bump on his head one day last month, and no one at the school could explain to her how it got there. Her daughter wants to learn more about science, but the coursework is heavy on the math and English that dominate state testing.

School 41 is representative in many ways of the Rochester City School District, which makes a strong case as the worst district in the country over the last 20 years.

Its features and flaws are well known:

- A student body that is overwhelmingly poor and segregated by race, with massive concentrations of homelessness, disability, trauma and lack of English skills.
- A tottering, ever-changing district bureaucracy unable to serve them.
- A mostly white teaching corps, in many cases unequipped to connect with children from a very different background.
- A city government by turns supportive, combative and complicit.
- A surrounding suburban core that has kept its distance from the troubled district it shares borders with.

School 41, in a cobbled-together brick building shoehorned among West Ridge Road, Kodak Park and Desmond Street, began as part of Greece schools before the city annexed that section of West Ridge Road in 1919.

For most of its history the school was associated inextricably with Kodak, not just in name but in deed. In 1929, more than half the 1,400 children there had a head-of-household working at Kodak, and nearly all of them were white, either born in the United States or immigrants from Europe.

The school demographics in 2018 are a rough match for the district as a whole: 94 percent are economically disadvantaged, 21 percent have disabilities and 12 percent are white.

The only real remaining link is in the name, and in a set of steam pipes running past the school’s north side and beneath Ridge Road.

The principal isn’t sure what they’re there for, and anyway, you can’t see them once the foliage comes in.

A new school will open in the same building in the fall with a new administration and mostly new teachers. Rivera plans to give it a chance.

“I’ll wait to see how it goes,” she said. “Hopefully with the new school we’ll see some improvement.”

Failure to make progress; state intervention; promised changes; parents wary and weary but hopeful for change. This is how things have stood for at least a generation in the Rochester City School District.

There is always incremental progress, including at School 41.

To date, though, it has never been enough to keep the district from squirming as the pressure increases from all quarters to find something — anything — that will work better.

### **Worst in the nation? Probably.**

The question is often asked: Is Rochester the worst school district in the state? In the country?

In New York state, it probably is.

The closest competition is Hempstead, on Long Island, which is also the only other district with a mandated, state-appointed “distinguished educa-tor,” like Rochester soon will have, designed to provide another layer of oversight on the district.

Among districts with at least 2,000 students, Rochester is worst at fourthgrade math and second-worst at fourthgrade English, beating only Syracuse. It has the lowest percentage of students who pass the Regents exams in Global History and Living Environment (biology), both required for graduation.

Its June 2017 graduation rate of 52 percent was a recent high, but only Hempstead was worse, along with two sub-districts in New York City.

It is eighth-worst on the New York School Quality Index, better than Buffalo, Yonkers and Hempstead, among other districts with more than 2,000 students.

The question is harder to answer on the national level, as states measure quality differently and dedicate vastly differing resources to education. Detroit and other large Rust Belt cities are usually the first names to surface as worst overall.

National graduation rates for all districts are not readily accessible. The education news outlet *The Hechinger Report* compiled all the 2013 rates; according to that data, Rochester’s 43 percent was worse than every other district in the country with at least 5,000 students, except Hempstead.

A recent Stanford University study measured apparent progress on standardized test scores by cohort year — how well 2017 eighth-graders did compared to 2016 seventh-graders, for example — and found that Rochester was last among cities across the country, with students making an average of 2.9 years’ worth of academic progress in the five years from third grade to eighth grade.

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**Jamariya Smith, in fourth grade at School 41, is taking notes in a class on when substances change state from liquid to solid.** OLIVIA LOPEZ/@OLOPEZ4/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



MAX SCHULTE, @MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF

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That leads to the other common question: Why are Rochester schools worse than those in other cities, which generally deal with the same sorts of urban ills?

Part of the reason is that Rochester experiences those urban ills more deeply. Many cities have problematic rates of childhood poverty, but Rochester exceeds nearly all of them. It is one of seven in the country with at least half its children living below the poverty line, which is \$25,100 for a family of four.

Rochester combines that punishing poverty with extreme racial and economic segregation.

A 2014 analysis by the UCLA Civil Rights Project found New York to be the most segregated state in the country, and Rochester to have not only the poorest children in New York but also the most intense metro segregation in the state.

“In the 30 years I have been researching schools, New York state has consistently been one of the most segregated states in the nation — no Southern state comes close to New York,” lead researcher Gary Orfield said then.

A 2016 study determined the steepest economic gradients in the country between school districts — that is, the lines that mark the starkest wealth divides.

Of the top 50 such borders in the country, three surround Rochester. Cleveland is the only other city in the country with 50 percent childhood poverty and three borders on that segregation list.

It seems, then, that the students walking into Rochester schools each morning — more than half in dire poverty, and racially and economically segregated — bring with them perhaps the weightiest collective challenges in the country.

## **7 superintendents in 16 years**

The numerous attempts at overhauling the district have left many underlying issues largely untouched.

■ In the late 1980s, the Rochester Teachers Association negotiated for a massive pay raise, accompanied by greater duties and ultimate responsibility for student outcomes. It made waves in national education circles and helped cement Adam Urbanski’s role in the district but ultimately did not produce radical change.

■ Charter schools have proliferated since the turn of the century, now serving about one in six children in the city. While those students mostly fare better on state tests, charter schools present a different set of problems: high suspension rates, numerous instances of mismanagement and a marked tendency not to take in students with significant disabilities, or those who don’t speak English well.

■ The Urban-Suburban program has expanded greatly in the last three years, with the majority of Monroe County school districts now participating. In general, the program takes a small number of the best-prepared students from the city and leaves the rest.

■ Receivership and “distinguished educators” are the latest of several enforcement mechanisms the state Education Department has instituted over the last 20 years; and the state itself faces pressure from increasing emphasis on accountability at the federal level.

All along, the district’s leaders have repeatedly compounded the problem through ill-conceived or poorly executed plans. The crisis that has consumed special education for the current school year is only the latest example.

There have been seven permanent or acting superintendents over the last 16 years, each with his or her own appointees and vision, meaning policies and initiatives have had difficulty taking root.

A 2016 study of the district by University of Rochester researcher Kara Finnigan showed how churn in relationships among school and district leaders made it difficult to sustain policies or institutional knowledge.

“In a place that hasn’t been functioning well for a long time, it’s hard to create (positive) relationships,” she said. “There’s a lot of blame, and people are less likely to go out on a limb and take risks. You have to find a way to change that dynamic.”

### **Closing after a century of schooling**

If Rochester is the worst school district in New York, Kodak Park School 41 is, by one measure, its worst school.

In 2017 fewer than 10 percent of students at any grade level were proficient in math or English, according to the state test. Most were lower than 5 percent. As a result, the district has decided to close it and reopen under a new name, yet to be determined, in the fall.

That will happen without Principal Lisa Whitlow.

She started as the school’s leader in August 2015, just weeks before classes began and a few months after the state Education Department had included the school on its inaugural receivership list. It was her first assignment as a building principal.

Unlike at other schools, state receivership at School 41 did not come with any additional state grant funding, so Whitlow spent much of her first year scrounging some up. She made School 41 one of the early sites for the district’s new emphasis on restorative and trauma-informed practices.

Suspensions went down dramatically, replaced with visits to a help zone, or to “calming corners” in classrooms. Attendance and instructional time rose. Partnerships with outside organizations were growing.

The change was disrupted the summer after her first year, though, when the school’s start time changed by nearly two hours as part of a larger district shift. About three-quarters of the school’s teachers left and many of the replacements were novices, Whitlow said. The new staff was willing but unseasoned; test scores did not improve enough.

The new school in the School 41 building will be the first of what RCSD is calling “RISE schools,” a kind of readymade replacement model for other schools that need to close because of state sanctions or other reasons.

There will be an emphasis on science, technology, engineering, math and the arts, former school chief, now deputy superintendent, Beth Mascitti-Miller said, with project-based learning and “family pods,” where adults are expected to get to know their children intimately. The model contains school reform elements that have been popular and successful elsewhere, including East High School.

School 41 is in its last weeks of operation and Whitlow, along with at least 50 percent of the teaching staff, is waiting to see where she’ll land in the fall.

“Everyone was all-in. We did everything we could,” she said. “It just didn’t meet the numbers they needed.

“Closing the gap isn’t just going to happen quickly. ... It’s not as simple as, ‘Let’s just change everything over and all pass the test.’ If it were that easy, we wouldn’t be here.”

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**Enissa Jimenez, a third-grader at Kodak Park School 41, thinking hard during one of the classroom exercises done by the students on computers. Despite efforts**

**Enissa Jimenez, a third-grader at Kodak Park School 41, thinking hard during one of the classroom exercises done by the students on computers. Despite efforts by the administrators at the school, School 41 is set to close in the fall and reopen with a new focus. OLIVIA LOPEZ/@OLOPEZ4/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**



**The students in this third-grade class at Kodak Park School 41 are split into groups doing different activities. This group of third-graders gathered together on the rug in the front of the classroom to do crafts. OLIVIA LOPEZ/@OLOPEZ4/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**



**Christopher Jesus Hart-Gill and his mother Amber Hart-Gill on their daily walk down Dewey Avenue from their home to Kodak Park School 41. OLIVIA LOPEZ, OLIVIA LOPEZ/@OLOPEZ4/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

