Is this off the table?

Concepts that touch on extending beyond city receive pushback from some leaders

RCSD

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For the first time in decades, decision-makers in Rochester are having a robust discussion about different models of governance for education in the city. Mayor Lovely Warren, state Education Commissioner Mary Ellen Elia and state Board of Regents Vice Chairman Andrew Brown have all said, using the same language: “Nothing is off the table.”

There is one concept, though, that is, if not off the table, at least hidden beneath the tablecloth: any solution touching on segregation or extending beyond city limits.

Even as Monroe County has been repeatedly identified as one of the most segregated communities in the nation, leaders from all quarters dismissed out of hand the idea of desegregation through some sort of metro schools concept.

“The mayor wants to focus on what is feasible and realistic for the children of Rochester,” city spokesman Justin Roj said. “A broader solution involving suburban districts is not realistic. ... She’s not interested in the broader debate over metro schools or engaging in that whatsoever.”

There were 51 schools in RCSD in 2016-17, the most recent year available for state data. Of them, 44 had at least 85 percent of students considered economically disadvantaged and 44 had at least 85 percent students of color. CARLOS ORTIZ/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO

“This is really targeted at RCSD,” Rep. Joe Morelle, D-Irondequoit, said. “Maybe someday we can talk about (a metro school district), but now let’s just focus on the city.” “We’d like to potentially get (suburban school leaders) together and at least get some perspective,” ROC the Future board Chairman Ajamu Kitwana said. “(But) the city is the starting point.”

This, even though ROC the Future’s letter to Elia prominently quotes an essay from former school board member and current city councilman Malik Evans calling the city’s educational woes part of a “regional and state issue” tied directly to segregation.

A poll conducted in December and January by the Siena Research Institute, commissioned by the Democrat and Chronicle, found 60 percent support of city residents in favor of a countywide school district and 49 percent support in the suburbs. Black respondents were by far the most likely to support such an arrangement, at 78 percent, compared with 47 percent for white respondents.

The counterargument is that concentrated poverty and its attendant ills should not be obstacles to students’ education in the city as long as adults provide them with the proper support. As Warren said Monday: “We have to make sure that every child that enters into our
Most of the lettersigners represent organizations working primarily in the city; none are from suburban schools or municipalities. Monroe County signed onto the letter to Elia, but county spokesman Jesse Sleezer later clarified that it was a general endorsement of “empower(ing) structural change in Rochester schools,” rather than an offer to bring any particular county resources to bear.

When asked for County Executive Cheryl Dinolfo’s position on countywide schools, Sleezer wrote in an email: “The county executive believes you can only fix a broken system by fixing what’s broken, not by taking what’s broken and injecting it into other systems. She does not support a metro schools solution.”

Lori Orologio, Churchville-Chili superintendent and president of the Monroe County Council of School Superintendents, was out of the office Monday and did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

There are a few members of the ROC the Future coalition who have at least discussed the need for desegregation in the past.

Larry Marx, CEO of The Children’s Agenda, said: “We need to think much more broadly about transformational change, including inter-district agreements.” He called school district lines “artificial boundaries” that need to be — he paused for a moment to choose the right word — “rejiggered.”

He said he was speaking in his role at The Children’s Agenda, though, not on behalf of ROC the Change. And he noted that the community — whether that means all of Monroe County or just the city of Rochester — is far from unified on the need for integrated schools.

The group Great Schools For All is also part of ROC the Future. It advocates for creating socioeconomically diverse schools that bring together willing urban and suburban students, but thus far has not made practical gains.

John Wilkinson, the group’s co-convenor and pastor at Third Presbyterian Church, said the question of what the word “community” means is a crucial point.

“We need to keep refining and explaining what our community is,” he said. “In my mind it extends beyond the city limits.”

school system has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of where they’re from, their neighborhood, their ZIP code. It doesn’t matter.”

A spokeswoman from the state Education Department repeated that “all options are on the table” and did not specifically rule out a solution that would implicate suburban districts. Elia has never before advocated for new inter-district de-segregation efforts, maintaining instead that RCSD needs to improve on its own.

The only existing mechanism that brings students together across the city line is the Urban-Suburban program, which enrolls more than 800 city students in suburban schools.

ROC the Future’s work, Wilkinson said, is “incremental and sequential.” The first point is to focus on distinguished educator Jaime Aquino’s specific observations and “get things stabilized,” he said, before broadening the conversation.

“What I keep saying (at ROC the Future) is, when you take the language in the distinguished educator’s letter about race and poverty, that’s important — and once you say that, it has to automatically broaden the conversation,” Wilkinson said. “I hope the point about deconcentrating poverty as an avenue to success — and the way to do that is some sort of inter-district effort, whatever you call it — I hope that is part of the conversation.

“And not everyone in that room agrees with that. But we all agree the concentration of poverty is an issue.”

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There were 115 schools in the suburban districts in the same year. Only one had a economically disadvantaged rate over 70 percent and none had more than 60 percent students of color.

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