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## RCS D Suggestion Overview

The RCS D has a myriad of problems and failures. At its root, I believe poverty, generational poverty in fact, is a key underlying cause for its systemic failure. However, you cannot put a period on that sentence alone and believe if this issue is addressed more coherently the structure will respond successfully. The reality is that it can't. We must recognize and agree the way we go about schooling itself is fundamentally flawed and unable to respond to the needs of Rochester's children. The evidence of failure has been apparent for years, and well-intentioned efforts to address it have completely missed the mark.

The continuous failure of the RCS D, and the death grip of poverty require us to ask some basic "what if" questions. *What if* we started over? *What if* we could build something from the ground up? Would we build what we have now? If not, what would we set in place? How would we finance it? Could we have any level of confidence the changes we'd make would bear fruit?

Below are ten possible steps to reengineer the RCS D. **What if:**

1. ***...K-12 schooling was twelve months in duration.*** We cannot sacrifice time when the evidence repeatedly indicates that children (hereafter referred to as students regardless of age) lose ground over a two-month hiatus from school. It also places too many students on the street where a different set of lessons are taught and reinforced.
2. ***...students age two to eight were enrolled in an early learning setting where literacy and social interactions became the foundational goals.*** Research consistently proves language and concept development are wonderfully formative at this early age. Students in poverty cannot be shortchanged by lack of proper developmental experiences and exposure to a wide breadth of necessary literacy understandings which, if not forged early, are a serious detriment to subsequent learning.
3. ***... what if the staffing of early learning centers included many living in the city.*** Too many parents of students aged 2 to 8 are children themselves. The early learning centers must have a broader goal than simply serving very young students. The centers can be a catalyst for employment and the development of their mothers/fathers and others within the community from which the students come. Breaking the back of poverty requires re-visualizing how the city raises its future generations and employs its current ones.

4. **...a Teaching Assistant model was used more actively.** Using this model at all levels can help reduce class sizes, customize learning hours and help assist with the implementation of a 12- month work year.
5. **...the large RCSD was divided into two smaller districts (one mostly east of the Genesee River the other mostly to the west of it.** Each would have their own school board, superintendent, budget and union contracts. The large centralized approach has proved unmanageable and consistently unable to respond to the unique needs of city neighborhoods.
6. **...stronger ties with Monroe County School Districts was a reality.** Affiliate the new west district with BOCES 2 and the western region suburban districts. Affiliate the east district with BOCES 1 and the eastern region suburban districts. The RCSD's "go it alone" philosophy must cease.
7. **... a strategic plan for the two regional districts was built upon a new 3R's.** In 2005 Bill Gates addressed a national summit on high school education<sup>1</sup>. The 3 R's he describes are applicable not only to high schools but all schools K-12. At the summit he stated successful high schools are, *"...built on principles that can be applied anywhere – the new three R's, the basic building blocks of better high schools:*
  - a. *The first R is Rigor – making sure all students are given a challenging curriculum that prepares them for college or work;*
  - b. *The second R is Relevance – making sure kids have courses and projects that clearly relate to their lives and their goals;*
  - c. *The third R is Relationships – making sure kids have a number of adults who know them, look out for them, and push them to achieve."*
8. **...the two new regional districts worked with non-profit agencies to provide additional collaboration and support for their students.** One outstanding example of this is the Communities In Schools effort that has documented success when working with at risk students in high need areas across the country.  
See their national website at: [www.communitiesinschools.org](http://www.communitiesinschools.org)
9. **...school was thought of as a concept and not a place.** For example, the senior year in high school could be redesigned to provide direct experience related to community service, independent study using technology and service to younger students as "senior mentors." The possibilities are endless, especially when not place bound. The stranglehold of K-12 grades and schooling occurring only in school sites as we know them must end.
10. **...all area colleges/universities were invited to play a role in the education, well-being and support of the students.** One of the region's greatest assets is its colleges and universities. A summit of college presidents and others needs to be called. Leaders from higher education institutions need to be invited to help prepare a strategic plan which begins a wide-ranging attack on poverty. Area colleges and universities provide an

incredible range of expertise and learning opportunities which are largely untapped. Asking the NYS Education Commissioner and the power of her office to assist in the building of a myriad of partnership efforts with these institutions could make a real difference not only for the students, but the larger impoverished community. Think beyond education, to health, criminal justice, and social services to name a few. Think of school sites being open beyond 3:00 to these institutions and the larger community. Think of a transportation system that has a larger purpose than transporting students to and from a school site. Thinking conceptually about schooling can transform the RCD over time to a thriving community resource. One which can help redefine the region in ways currently unimagined.

### **Additional thoughts and support for the ten “what ifs” above**

- Paulo Friere, author of, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*<sup>2</sup> believed to successfully address adult illiteracy in Brazil the instructors needed to live in the village. When they did, their ability to be with the people and to make their lessons *relevant* became possible. This approach was successful in significantly reducing adult illiteracy when past attempts had failed. While residency cannot be forced upon the staff, there are steps which can be taken if a different staffing model is gradually implemented. Teaching Assistants can be deployed under the supervision of certified classroom teachers. Teaching Assistants can be drawn from city neighborhoods (responding to Friere’s belief that instructors need to be directly connected to the village). Their certification requirements are less than those required of a teacher, easing recruitment challenges and establishing a pay structure and an eight-hour, 12-month work expectation. (See *End Notes* for more on Teaching Assistants TA’s.)
  - To implement this model will take time and negotiations. One way to ease implementation is to utilize teacher turnover (resignations and retirements) as an introductory approach.
  - Class-size reductions can also take place with the implementation of the TA model.
  - The TA model can be introduced in highest poverty areas first. A selected site can be identified as “proof of concept” and the new 12-month eight-hour schooling approach could be set in motion.
- The new 3R’s...
  - *Relationship*: For me author, Parker Palmer<sup>3</sup>, best described the teaching side of a healthy relationship effort.
    - *A teacher must be in a fit relationship with her/himself*. The fit relationship with self can easily be extended to students as well. This begs the question, what are the human resource strategies that will promote healthy adults and children in a school setting? There needs to be a clear-

mindful viewpoint on this as well as a series of strategies that combine to enable all the individuals attending and working in schools to be physically and emotionally comfortable/stable. For the students attending RCD schools, this means a major rethink of public health resources which are deployed to their advantage. For example, developing new partnerships with MCC and the University of Rochester where their students engage in real-life settings that offer them opportunities to serve and learn simultaneously. Other area colleges offer social work and human services degrees. Internships and collaboration with them needs to expand.

- *A teacher's relationship to the content he/she teaches is important.* What does the system do to maintain expertise and knowledge of pedagogy as well as the subject matter itself? When professional knowledge of the content being taught is deep, the bridge to making learning relevant for a student(s) can be crossed. I have seen, too frequently, the content knowledge of teachers (especially math and science at the elementary school level) to be lacking. Without content depth, diagnosis and intervention with student learning challenges is very difficult to accomplish. A comprehensive staff development effort needs to be in place. Area colleges and universities must be more engaged in helping address this need.
- *The ability to establish and maintain trusting relationships with others.* This applies throughout the system, adult to adult, parent to staff and of course student to teacher relationships. It also applies to RCD's institutional relationship to the larger community. Issues of racism, cultural disconnects and distrust are clearly evident. It will take more than inservice courses to respond to these serious gaps. Currently the teachers' union argues over what to title such courses so as not to offend their members. How is it possible to bridge such serious disconnects when this is the state-of-being? The education of the city's students requires more than a staff of certified teachers who most often do not live in the city and would not want their children attending the schools in which they work. This reality will not change in the near term. Therefore, new ways to engage clergy and community leaders directly in the education of students needs to be considered. The silo structures and thinking that disengage the system from the community must be torn down over time.
- *Relevance:* The work of David Kolb<sup>4</sup> at Case Western University, regarding experiential learning ties directly to this principle. Currently, schools fail too often to answer the question, *why is this important for me to learn?* In so doing, students tune out or fail to experience real-world applications of abstract content. The hide-bound nature of schooling, especially at the high school level, requires students to be passive participants in their education. Experiential learning must

be imbedded in the overall learning plan for every student. This could begin with a total restructuring of grade 12 where active community involvement, work experience and independent study are front and center.

- *Rigor* can be a by-product of sound relationships and content relevance. Here again, we have bound-up the RCSD in a narrow definition of rigor. Ask yourself, could I pass a Regents exam on World History today? Yet, a student's graduation is contingent upon passing the Global Studies Regents examination among many others. A revised definition of rigor (success) needs to be pursued. Quality needs a larger definition. (See Gates Chili's "Quality School Rubric" as an example. The *End Notes* provide a link to see this document.) While data is important to determining a system's success, it can be overemphasized as the means to make such judgments. The State Education Department is excessively driven to use data and testing as the means to determine if a system is effective in meeting the needs of its students. The by-product of an excessively data driven culture is student failure and teacher frustration rather than success.
  
- The lack of sound strategic planning is evident. Leadership turnover and the contentious dynamics related to unions, the mayor's office and the larger community are underlying excuses for not addressing this urgent need. The Mission of the district is a straight forward one, *"To create the right conditions for learning for every student."* We can debate (and should) what the term "right" in the suggested Mission means. However, I believe it should be based upon the Gates Foundation's new 3R's. Successful schools can use Gates Chili's "Quality School Rubric" (or one developed by a representative RCSD committee) as a basis for developing improvement plans. The Distinguished Educator's Report is an excellent starting point for discussion. However, it is premised on improving what is. The most important aspect of a strategic plan is not to see it as an improvement effort ...it is an opportunity to reinvent, to deal honestly and openly with "What ifs." It is time to stop tinkering at the margins!
  
- The current structure of the RCSD is unmanageable. How much more evidence is needed to prove this? In the "what if" outline above I suggested dividing the district into two new (independent) ones. The current "go it alone" philosophy disinvents many others who could and should engage in the education of Rochester's students. The RCSD too rarely affiliates with other Monroe County School Districts and the other schools in the county do not engage with the RCSD on a comprehensive basis. A model which directly affiliates them (fully) with the BOCES structure could benefit everyone. It also is an area where the SED could become a partner in the overall improvement process. The two new RCSD districts would enable competition, end the current historical bickering as new Boards,

administrations and union leadership emerge. Surely, it doesn't guarantee success, but the current bureaucracy and inability to cooperate must be addressed in a manner that turns the page and forges new alliances and opportunities that have heretofore been consistently closed.

- One likely response to what I have suggested is that it is unfordable. The financial state of the RCSD is another major area that needs a complete overhaul. I believe the size of the current organization does not provide economies of scale. In fact, the reverse is happening. Shrinking the size to two separate regional districts will enable a better grasp on resources and their subsequent deployment. Using a new staffing model with a significant increase in TA's for direct instruction, versus the cost of exclusively using certified teachers as the only classroom instructors, can provide a new way to expand the school year and day without requiring a dramatic increase in funding. The harsh reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century model for instructional delivery is that it is expensive. It fails to use technology, differentiated staffing and alternative settings for learning. While there would be fewer teachers in the model I suggest, their roles and leadership responsibilities would be elevated.

I had the opportunity to review the RCSD's response to the Distinguished Educator's Report. Frankly, it prescribes a huge amount of busy work. In my judgement most of the tasks outlined will not fundamentally change the depth and breadth of student learning. If there was an opportunity to do things over, I would venture to say the system currently in place would not be the right answer. If this is a basic truth, why are those involved about to devote a vast amount of time, talent and resources to continue it? A 21<sup>st</sup> century education cannot be built on a 20<sup>th</sup> century foundation of failure and neglect. It is time for a systemic call to action where re-invention and re-visioning are the expected outcomes. It is time to draw upon the vast resources of the community to build an education system which truly serves students with high needs in areas where poverty cruelly reigns.

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## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>National Education Summit Bill Gates Remarks: <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/Media-Center/Speeches/2005/02/Bill-Gates-2005-National-Education-Summit>

<sup>2</sup> “Paulo Reglus Neves Freire was a Brazilian educator and philosopher who was a leading advocate of critical pedagogy. He is best known for his influential work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, generally considered one of the foundational texts of the critical pedagogy movement.” [Wikipedia](#)

<sup>3</sup> “Parker J. Palmer is an American author, educator, and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change. He is the founder and Senior Partner Emeritus of the Center for Courage and Renewal.” [Wikipedia](#)

<sup>4</sup> “David A. Kolb is an American educational theorist whose interests and publications focus on experiential learning, the individual and social change, career development, and executive and professional education.” [Wikipedia](#)

**Teaching Assistants** can independently teach students with lessons prepared by certified teachers. Think of how the TA model could be applied in multiple settings to reduce class sizes, create twelve-month experiences and extend the length of the school day. See <http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/pdf/experiencerequirements.pdf> for further information related to this and other career associated certificates.

**Quality School Rubric:** See: Rickstein.net