

Lesli Myers-Small
Superintendent

Henri Van White
BOE President

Rochester City School District
131 W. Broad Street
Rochester, NY 14614

October 28th, 2021

Dear Superintendent Myers-Small and President Van White:

We write in response to the October 15 letter from RTA, BENTE, RAP and ASAR. While we share many concerns about district operations this school year, we are concerned about some of the solutions suggested by the unions. We believe it is possible to create and sustain a healthy school culture without exclusionary discipline and police tactics. And more than possible, it is urgent.

Student misbehavior is not the *cause* of poor conditions in Rochester Public Schools, or any public schools; it is a *symptom*. Put simply, our students are under-supported to return to school successfully after several semesters of learning at home. Unfortunately, a wish to return to the pre-pandemic status quo cannot heal the damage of the past 18 months. Simply returning to the status quo does not solve the multiple crises facing Rochester families, students, and educators. And pretending there are no crises, or they don't impact the school day, is a recipe for disaster.

There are two suggestions in the union letter that we must urgently address. First, the proposal that "students who choose to disrupt" class should be excluded from in-person instruction is appalling. This is tantamount to calling for a mass out-of-school suspension; it is inappropriate and likely unlawful. Under no circumstances should RCSD consider creating a plan to execute a blanket denial of students' due process and education rights. The idea that labor unions would choose which young people are worthy of receiving an education is anathema to the concept of public education.

Second, the suggestion that RCSD undo years of work by activists, students, parents, educators, and other community members, and that we bring SRO's back into schools is devastating. RCSD proved itself to be among the most progressive school districts in the nation when it listened to students and realized that police do not belong in schools. The harms caused by police in schools are well-documented, especially for Black and Latinx students and students with disabilities; inviting them back would be ignoring those students' lived experiences. RCSD must instead invest heavily in alternatives to police—alternatives that keep students in school, are culturally-responsive and sensitive, and do not resort to state violence to maintain order. We must prohibit the normalization of unnecessary police surveillance of our Black and Latinx students and communities.

We agree with the concerns raised by the unions that a lack of staffing, large class sizes, and a lack of support services for students are root causes of disruption in schools. We would add to that list the chaos created by the bus driver shortage, the lack of hot lunches for students (many of whom rely on school lunch programs to eat), and the lack of sanitary conditions for students.

For the first time in many years, RCSD actually has the funding from the state and federal government to address these problems. We urge you to invest those dollars in students instead of in systems that abuse and alienate them. We urge you to work with local violence interrupters and community-based organizations to prevent escalation of conflicts and identify drivers of violence (including conflict that is occurring outside of school and spilling over). We urge you to hire additional support staff—counselors, clinical mental health providers, social workers, school nurses and parent coordinators—before resorting to involving police. NorthSTAR closing its doors to students due to violence and a shortage of staff is a prime example of how the district has failed to work with violence interrupters, restorative practice coaches, and hire support staff to mitigate conflict. Closure of the school to go fully remote is tantamount to a school wide suspension when the district has the money to invest in and expand on resources and programs to meet our student’s needs.

Our organizations are committed to working with RCSD to create safe and supportive learning environments for all students. We work directly with student leaders who would love to share their ideas with you. Please contact Stevie Vargas at stevie@aqeny.org to set up a meeting.

Sincerely,

New York Civil Liberties Union
The Children's Agenda
Avenue BlackBox Theater
Avenue BlackBox Children's Theater Project
Free the People Roc
Teen Empowerment
Citizen Action of New York
Alliance Quality Education
Working Families Party
Rochester Organization of Rank and File (RORE)
Enough is Enough