

CITY NEWSPAPER

EDUCATION: City's new schools: a mix of promise and caution

By [Tim Louis Macaluso](#) on November 8, 2011

A year after the city school district opened five new high schools in a sweeping attempt at reform, a Center for Governmental Research evaluation gives a moderately upbeat, but cautionary report on the schools' progress.

The new schools - Early College; Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math High; Robert Brown High School of Construction and Design; Vanguard Collegiate; and Integrated Arts and Technology - opened in the fall of 2010.

In general, the schools performed better than the district as a whole, the CGR report says. Students' GPAs were higher. And many ninth-grade students had already earned five credits, which can be an indicator of progress toward graduation, says CGR's Kirstin Pryor.

But results on state exams for the new schools were mixed. In head-to-head comparisons of passing rates, the new schools generally performed better than the district as a whole, but not dramatically so. The explanation could be rooted, the report says, in a lack of consensus about what constitutes instructional rigor and high expectations by teachers and students.

Surveys revealed that 92 percent of students and 95 percent of teachers in the new schools said expectations are high for students' behavior and work. But that was not the conclusion CGR reached after multiple classroom observations.

"We saw classes where students were allowed not to work, answers were freely given to students if they raised their hands, work was very low-level, and little or no responsibility for learning was placed upon the students," the report says.

Another concern: while attendance in the new schools was higher than in the district, so were suspension rates.

Bolgen Vargas, interim superintendent of city schools, wouldn't comment on the CGR report.

In an effort to provide students and parents with a choice of quality high schools, the city school district took an ambitious and controversial course of action: it began phasing-out its poorest-performing schools last year and opening new schools.

The plan to open the new schools was developed under former Superintendent Jean-Claude Brizard, under pressure from the State Education Department. In January 2010, the SED identified 34 persistently low-achieving high schools: nine of them were in the Rochester school district. Closing low-performing schools and opening new schools is one of the reform options allowed by the SED.

CGR's report is not meant to be a predictor of success or failure for the new schools, Pryor said. Instead, she says, it is more of a benchmark for future evaluations.

But the report is important for several reasons, she says. It's not unusual for a new school, with its fresh culture and physical environment, to perform better than established schools in its first year, Pryor says. But as the school grows and adds more grades, it becomes challenging to prevent a reincarnation of the problems characteristic of low-performing schools.

Also, the city's new schools received financial support and resources from grants and state funding. But that funding is temporary, and eventually the district will have to entirely support the schools.

"We know that the phase-out, phase-in approach is the more expensive approach to remediating troubled schools," says Interim Superintendent Vargas.

It is also, he says, disruptive to students and parents. And it isn't always successful at improving student performance. Rochester has closed, opened, and reconfigured schools in the past with little success. And there are many skeptics who don't believe the new schools will succeed.

The success of the schools will depend greatly on the ability of teachers and principals to improve student engagement and make a higher level of work the norm, the CGR report says. And CGR has recommended that all of the new schools report to the same school chief.

The district has to do a better job of recognizing the indicators of problems early on and then monitoring progress toward solutions, Vargas says.

"In the past, we would come up with a plan and declare victory before it was even implemented," he says.