

CITY NEWSPAPER

EYE ON EDUCATION PART II: City school teachers

By [Tim Louis Macaluso](#) on September 21, 2011

In a spirited debate about a salary increase for Rochester's teachers, one person put it this way: "The thing that's distressing to me is they don't discriminate between the ones who richly deserve this and the ones who are incompetent. I'm all for improving conditions for teachers, but schools are going to have to monitor themselves and expunge people who aren't deserving of these kinds of rewards."

Any number of people could have said as much during the contract negotiations earlier this year between the Rochester Teachers Association and the city school district. But it was former mayor Bill Johnson who made the comment to a Times-Union reporter in 1987. Johnson was president of the Urban League of Rochester at the time.

The same article had a response from RTA President Adam Urbanski, who pushed for the raise.

"I'm saying unequivocally, if you do not see appreciable outcomes in student performance, then I would not argue for a substantial increase (in pay)," he said.

It appears not much has changed in Rochester's schools over the last 25 years.

In this second installment of City's series, "Eye on Education," we look at teachers in the city school district (the first installment can be found [here](#)). Like their colleagues in urban districts across the country, Rochester's teachers face mounting pressure to improve student outcomes. Political and economic concerns have ushered in a strong anti-union, anti-teacher sentiment and protections city school teachers have enjoyed for decades - tenure, seniority, and a salary structure that isn't based on performance - are being questioned.

Moreover, teachers in New York are bracing for newly designed, more rigorous job evaluations. How well students perform on standardized state tests this year will, for the first time, count for a portion of a teacher's evaluation.

Most teachers we talked to for this story recognize the field is experiencing a dramatic change. And depending on your view of education reform, this is either the worst or the best time to be a city school teacher. Either way, the ongoing search for solutions to the problems plaguing many city schools raises questions for teachers, school administrators, parents, and community leaders.

Who are Rochester's teachers, and are they to blame for the district's decades-long struggle with low graduation rates? Are Rochester's teachers rigorously evaluated, and are incompetent teachers fired in a timely manner? And are city and county officials and agencies doing enough to help poor students and their families?

Who are they?

A perennial concern with Rochester's teaching staff is that it bears little resemblance to the student body. District data for the

2010-2011 school year show that while more than 80 percent of the student population is black or Hispanic, city teachers are largely white and female. Out of about 3,100 teachers employed with the district, about 1,866 are white and more than 2,400 are female.

For a variety of reasons, male teachers are in scarce supply. There were about 100 black males and only 45 Hispanic male teachers in city schools last year. And white female teachers outnumbered white male teachers by more than two-to-one.

Also, an analysis of employee ZIP codes, which are provided by employees on a voluntary basis, shows that only 712 of the district's teachers reside in the city.

While there are many questions about the long-term consequences of these imbalances, Rochester's teachers do resemble teachers in public schools across the country. Still, concerns about whether white suburban women understand black and Hispanic cultures sufficiently to teach city school students persist.

One city school teacher who asked not to be identified said that her students would benefit from seeing more black and Hispanic male teachers, as well as more doctors, attorneys, and electrical engineers.

"If you live in some of the neighborhoods where most of my kids grow up, you won't see many dads who are teachers and engineers," she said. "And I want my students to see success in all of its forms. I want them to look up and see all of the possibilities. But if you're asking me if I have a problem relating to my students or they have a problem relating to me because of differences in skin color or culture, the answer is no."

Besides being largely white and female, city school teachers are, to a significant extent, in their mid-career years. According to State Education Department reports, only 6 percent of teachers in 2009-2010 had fewer than three years of teaching experience.

A bigger concern for district officials may be the high turnover rate among newer teachers. Reflecting a national trend, the turnover rate for city school teachers with fewer than five years of experience was 30 percent in 2008-2009, the last school year reported.

This was a concern for former Superintendent Jean-Claude Brizard. If a large majority of the district's teachers have tenure and seniority, the teaching workforce becomes more expensive and less assessable to new teachers. This is also making it difficult for the district to diversify its workforce because new minority teachers are often the last in and, under seniority rules, the first to go.

A difficult year

By almost any measurement, the last school year was troubling for many city school teachers in Rochester. Even though graduation rates inched up slightly, a shocking state report indicated that a measly 5 percent of city students graduate ready for the rigors of college coursework.

And a protracted union-led battle with Brizard reached a boiling point when, in an unusual show of solidarity, teachers held a "no confidence" vote in Brizard's leadership. Brizard left the district for the top post in Chicago's schools, citing the deterioration of his relationship with teachers as one of his reasons for leaving.

But the clash between Brizard and the teachers union was not without some advance warning. In a 2010 report on Rochester city schools by the Center for Governmental Research, two-thirds of teachers surveyed said they didn't feel valued for their work.

"I was on my way to work one morning and I was thinking about all the things I was going to do that day, and I was really excited and

in a hurry to get there," says Sharon Flynn, a teacher with School 8. "Then I heard Brizard talking on the radio. He was saying, 'We have to get rid of the district's older, incompetent teachers.' And I thought, 'Wait a minute, was he just talking about me?'"

Teachers also objected to Brizard's infamous "rubber room," the alternative work office at 690 St. Paul Street. Teachers are removed from classrooms and sent to the site to wait for outcomes of investigations into alleged misconduct. Brizard objected to sending teachers home with pay. The practice was loosely modeled after a similar practice in New York City schools.

The room was being overused, says the RTA's Urbanski, and teachers often didn't know why they were sent there. Urbanski and School Board President Malik Evans say the RTA and the district have resolved most of their concerns with the alternative work office, though the room is still in use.

Poverty's puzzle

The conflict between Brizard and city school teachers was only partly about the superintendent's leadership style. Brizard was also trying to make a fundamental shift in the district's culture from one that tends to see poverty as an obstacle to student achievement to one that doesn't.

Some education reformers insist that under the right circumstances, such as longer school days and one-on-one instruction, teachers can build an educational overpass to poverty.

But the teachers City interviewed say that poverty can have a crushing delay on a child's development. The problems created by poverty are sometimes so great, these teachers say, they can overwhelm a classroom.

The 2010 CGR report said that about 65 percent of the district's teachers and 30 percent of principals agreed that "schools can't accomplish much" until the wider community addresses poverty.

"We have to deal with what is happening to our children outside the classroom before we can even begin teaching," says School 8's Flynn. "Students often come in with such a deficit. It's a struggle and it takes time for them to catch up."

Deficit is a word city school teachers and principals use a lot. The average kindergarten student in Greece enters school with a 3,000-word vocabulary, says Tim Mains, principal at School 50.

"The average kindergarten kid enters a city school with a 300-word vocabulary, 12 of which shouldn't be used," he says. "What infuriates me most is that the general community bangs on the district and bangs on the teachers. But they won't lift a finger to help."

The community has to provide assistance long before students reach school age, Mains says.

"A whole lot of my parents are who you might call the working poor," he says. "Most of my kids haven't been read to. If one of their parents lost a job, the whole family would go k-foeey."

Teaching conditions

City schools often don't have the same materials, such as science labs, books, and musical instruments, as their suburban counterparts, say many of the teachers we spoke to. Teachers are under tremendous pressure to get the best achievement possible from their students, they say, but many work in old school buildings and often without adequate student enrichment programs, like

art, drama, and music.

Ruth Moss-Clark, a teacher at School 50, says she wishes the district had more money for technology. Some classrooms have the new SMART Boards in place of chalkboards, but she says she would like to see more students with laptops, iPads, and other devices.

"Children need to have this and they need to know how to use it," Moss-Clark says. "Our students deserve no less. The 21st-century classroom is about technology. If you get a teacher that is just standing up there lecturing, it's not going to work."

In addition to resources for students and classrooms, many teachers we spoke to, particularly in high schools, are concerned about violence and disruptive behavior. While most of the teachers say they would like to see an end to the security screening of students, they say safety is serious concern. One teacher described being assaulted by a student, and another teacher spoke of being injured while trying to break up a fight between two students.

The State Education Department's Violence and Disruptive Incidents Report requires districts to provide data annually. The 2009-2010 report shows seven reports of students possessing a weapon in Charlotte High School, and 79 minor altercations that didn't involve weapons. At John Marshall High School, there were 15 reports of students possessing a weapon in school, three assaults with a weapon, and 15 without a weapon. There were also 40 minor altercations without weapons and one with a weapon.

Effective teaching

When the teachers we spoke to were asked how they could be more effective in the classroom, their first response was often, "greater parental involvement." It's the basic things that help children be better students and graduate, they say.

"Attendance is a huge factor," says Lynn O'Brien, a teacher at Integrated Arts and Technology High School. "Too many kids just don't attend school. And if they're not in their seats, how can they possibly learn?"

But absenteeism is a tricky problem to solve, O'Brien says.

"A lot of times parents will think their child is in school, and they're shocked to find out that they haven't been to school for two days," she says.

In other cases, O'Brien says, it's a matter of improving parenting skills.

"I've called parents who say, 'He doesn't want to come to school today,'" she says.

The teachers we talked to say most parents want to be supportive, but don't always have the means. Transportation, language barriers, conflicting work schedules, and parents' educational limitations are all part of the equation.

Creating time to meet parents or return their calls often extends the workday, teachers say, but it's necessary, especially when working with poor families. The end result, they say, is a better classroom and school environment.

"I tell them, 'Please, pull up a chair and talk to me any time of day, any day of the week,'" School 8's Flynn says. "You're not just helping your child. You're helping everyone else's children, too."

Even if some parents aren't well-educated, their attitudes about education make a difference, says Peter Voight, a third-grade teacher with School 50.

"You can tell when there is an intrinsic value for education in the home, even when parents don't know the English language," he says.

Teaching experience matters even more when parental support isn't possible. The biggest hurdle for most teachers is learning how to manage a classroom. It's a milestone all teachers must reach, regardless of the grade they're teaching or whether they're working in an urban or suburban school.

"If you've never done this, teaching can often seem easy," says Principal Mains. "But it's not easy at all. There is an art and a science to it. On an average day, teachers are making a thousand split-second decisions. At a certain point, they're no longer being made at a conscious level."

Mains says one of his most important jobs as principal is getting the best teacher he can into every classroom.

"I go out and look for great people," he says. "If I can't find them, the question becomes, 'Can I make this person great?' Sometimes that means getting out there and protecting them from all of the crazy stuff around us. Sometimes it means coaching them."

Working in an urban school is the most challenging assignment a teacher can choose, Mains says. The emotional rollercoaster can be a rough ride for some, he says, especially because many of the statistics are grim.

"Though data about teaching poor kids is depressing, I tell them, 'It's data, not destiny,'" Mains says.

Another reason some teachers fail is that they develop a negative attitude toward students, says Kevin Klein, former principal of School 39. Klein is now principal of Integrated Arts and Technology High School, which opened last year. Some teachers experience what he says is a gradual burnout.

"I don't think there are a lot of teachers who start with a bad attitude," he says. "It develops over time, and kids sense it immediately."

The job can take a toll on a teacher's family life, Klein says, because the hours are long and often involve nights and weekends.

Both Klein and Mains say they have counseled teachers out of the job when coaching hasn't helped to improve their skills.

But how to become an effective teacher in an urban school environment is still somewhat of a mystery. Organizations like Teach for America believe they may have the answer, and they have shown some success in raising student achievement. TFA is a nonprofit that recruits new teachers to invest two years of their careers working in low-income schools.

Intensive teacher training, including a five-week summer course for new teachers is a key component of Teach for America's approach to teacher preparation, says Crystal Brakke, vice president of TFA.

But Rafe Esquith, Los Angeles public school teacher and author of "Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire," is concerned that young teachers often leave college believing they can save every poor child. And that's not his experience, he says.

Becoming an effective teacher is a long journey, Esquith says, and the teacher-bashing in urban education is hurting the profession.

Compensation and evaluations

Teachers' views on compensation vary widely. Education isn't a field that typically attracts people looking for high salaries. Many teachers pursue education for altruistic reasons - they want to help. But teachers say that society's respect for the profession has diminished over time.

One sign of that, says School 50's Moss-Clark, is lack of financial investment in teachers.

"I don't think that we're appreciated in American society," she says. "We go to school for six years and new teachers come out of school and they can barely survive. We work very hard to try to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of our children. And it would be nice to know that society values, and is willing to invest in that."

But critics say investment in education is being made. The single-largest expense of any school district is often teacher compensation, and student outcomes haven't improved significantly in many urban schools.

First-year teachers without prior experience or a master's degree earn a starting salary of about \$41,825 in the city school district, according to the RTA. And they receive 10 paid days for illness and two personal days. Teachers work a minimum of 185 days, but they're paid for 200 days. And they can receive reimbursement for tuition toward their first master's degree, since it's one of the requirements for state certification.

Teachers also have access to health insurance and other benefits. But one important benefit for teachers typically unavailable to private-sector workers is a generous pension contribution from their employer.

There are five tiers to the retirement program, according to the New York State Teachers Retirement System. Most teachers are in tier four and required to contribute 3 percent of their annual salary for 10 years, which goes toward their pension.

But teachers who entered the system starting in 2010 are tier five, and must contribute 3.5 percent for their entire time of employment.

The employer's contribution fluctuates, but is currently 8.62 percent annually.

Grants for pilot projects and programs to improve teaching and student outcomes have sprung up across the country. But the funds often come with strings attached. In order for New York to win federal Race to the Top funds, for example, New York State United Teachers supported a new evaluation system for teachers.

While much of the evaluation is based on locally determined assessment tools such as classroom observations, beginning this year 20 percent of a teacher's evaluation - starting with English and math teachers in 4th through 8th grades - will be based on test results. Evaluations that could lead to increases in compensation or in other cases, termination of employment based on standardized test scores are perhaps the most contentious issue for teachers today.

But this may be the only way to shake-up the education bureaucracy and shake out ineffective teachers, say some education reformers. Even before the new evaluations were voted into state law, former superintendent Brizard was highly critical of what he said was the district's inefficiency at evaluating teachers.

School board policy requires that every teacher be evaluated annually. It's the superintendent's job to implement the policy and the

board's responsibility to enforce it.

Through the Freedom of Information Act, City asked about the district's thoroughness in performing teacher evaluations. The district was asked how many elementary and secondary teachers were given performance evaluations during the last three school years. But the district was unable to provide an answer. A written statement from the district said: "The district does not maintain documents and is not able to retrieve electronic data that responds to your request."

However, a January 2011 report commissioned by Brizard, "Review of the Teacher Human Capital Work in the Rochester City School District," raises questions about the district's efficiency at teacher evaluations. Among the report's findings: "Evaluations of teachers are inconsistently done. Sixty-five percent of first-year teachers didn't receive their final evaluation by May 15 as required."

"In the last six years, 10 teachers were referred to the Teacher Improvement Program," the report says. "Six of these teachers were dismissed."

The TIP is essentially a mentoring program for teachers.

Perhaps most important was this comment in the report: "There is a significant range in principals' ability to effectively observe and analyze instruction and support teachers to improve, and their understanding of this as one of their most important job responsibilities."

In fairness, all of the teachers City interviewed say they are evaluated in a timely manner. And district officials say that contrary to Brizard's report, 13 teachers have been discharged since the 2008-2009 school year, 179 resigned during their probationary period, and 44 resigned "in lieu of termination."

It's unclear why there is disparity between Brizard's report and the district's data. But Deborah Rider, a spokesperson for the Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester, says she is familiar with the report Brizard commissioned. She says she believes principals and vice principals may have conducted the evaluations, but the data was not entered into the district's system.

Many of the teachers we spoke to say they welcome classroom observations and administrative supervision. They also say teachers need to be held accountable. But they are wary of the new evaluations, and they are especially concerned about whether student test scores will be a fair representation of their work.

Interim Superintendent Vargas supports the new evaluations.

"All teachers will be evaluated," he says. "The principals and vice principals are engaged in training in how to do them. It's difficult to do, but there's no excuse not to do them. Evaluation is a significant part of a teacher's development. Every teacher I know agrees with me on this because teaching in terms of student outcomes matters."

The new evaluations are required for teachers in English and math in 4th to 8th grades in this first year of implementation, but the RTA's Urbanski says the union is going to suggest all teachers opt in to become familiar with the process. There will be no adverse consequences for teachers who opt in earlier than necessary, he says.

The teachers we talked to are upbeat about Vargas, and some say they're watching his relationship with Urbanski closely. Only weeks after Vargas joined the district, negotiations on a new teachers' contract, which had stalled under Brizard, were resumed. One

of the sticking points: Brizard wanted to change the district's compensation structure for teachers to one that is more performance-based, instead of one where all teachers with the same combination of education and experience earn roughly the same pay. And Brizard was willing to hold out for it.

But Urbanski doesn't support merit pay for teachers.

Urbanski and Vargas agreed on a new contract, and merit pay wasn't included. Teachers did receive a salary increase, and the union agreed to go without retroactive pay for the time they were without a contract. The contract expired in 2009, but was extended for a year.

"I've been doing this for more than 30 years, Urbanski says. "I was not about to agree to a contract that doesn't keep Rochester's teacher salaries competitive with the rest of Monroe County."