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Task Force Seeks Community Feedback on Proposed Code of Conduct, a First Step To Improving Climate for Learning and Teaching in Rochester Schools

ROCHESTER — The 50-plus members of the Rochester Community Task Force on School Climate are releasing a draft of a proposed new Code of Conduct for Rochester city schools and looking for community input.

The draft Code, the segment focused on students, is easier to read and understand and incorporates language that is supportive of developmentally appropriate rules and interventions that will help students, families, and school personnel address behaviors when they arise in schools. In the past, suspensions have been used as a response to any infraction. The proposed Code outlines four levels of student behavior and would permit suspensions only for actions deemed to be Level 3 or 4 — and only as a last resort.

“The current Code of Conduct is punitive, criminalizing student behavior across the board,” says Chris Dandino, a member of the task force who is a youth program quality consultant and co-chair of the Greater Rochester After-School Alliance. “The new draft is prevention- and intervention-based. We want and welcome discipline that teaches, not punitive measures that contribute to problems like low graduation rates.”

The proposed student segment of the Code also includes:

- Student rights, including a grievance process;
- Language that shows a strong preference for keeping students in school;
- Description of training for all school staff that is rooted in restorative practices;
- A matrix of infractions with clear definitions and guidance on what level of interventions and consequences are appropriate; and
- Specific ways to address and eliminate racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions.

The task force is a unique collaboration between the Rochester City School District, parents, students, teachers and other school personnel, nonprofit leaders and community representatives. For the first 10 months, the group has been working with the Advancement Project, based in Washington, D.C., on the student portion of the Code of Conduct, along with an initial set of recommendations to the district. In order to prepare for the 2015-2016 school year, each group of recommendations is being released for public review and feedback as drafts are ready. The portion of the Code currently ready for input focuses on student behavior.

Work continues on a broader set of recommendations that involve more preventative, early steps toward changing the school climate, including stronger parent engagement, more student involvement in decision-making, expanded delivery of a culturally informed curriculum and more. Cumulatively, these recommendations are expected to fundamentally shift how the district handles suspensions and behaviors in order to create an environment in schools where it is a joy to teach and learn, and where families feel welcomed and connected.

The draft Code, along with the first set of recommendations, come on the heels of a report that showed that the Rochester City School District's current policies and practices have created a strained environment that is not always conducive to teaching and learning. The report, compiled by the Advancement Project, Alliance for Quality Education, Metro Justice, and Teen Empowerment, showed that 89% of students who were suspended in the 2013-2014 school year were sent home from school for non-violent offenses. In addition, students of color and students with disabilities were suspended at higher rates than their counterparts. For example, black students were more than two times more likely to be suspended than their white peers.

The Community Task Force believes that these disparities demonstrate the need to better understand the roles of race, racism, and privilege in our schools. For that reason, the task force's series of recommendations will suggest the need for district-wide professional development to grow awareness and skills to address this.

"The need for professional development and support for teachers, students and administrators cannot be understated. Thankfully, the district has been working hand-in-hand with members of the task force and is really being a partner in this effort," says task force member Cynthia Herriott-Sullivan, executive director of Rise Up Rochester, a nonprofit organization that promotes a nonviolent culture in the community and provides support to crime victims and their families.

The group readily admits that the changes in the Code of Conduct alone will not change school climate. That is why the series of recommendations to the district are paramount for fully addressing these issues in the schools.

“Policy alone won’t do it, but how we start implementation in the schools will,” says Kaylynn Brown, a task force member who is a youth organizer from Teen Empowerment. A Rochester City School District graduate, she had her own struggles with these issues as a student and wants to leave a better school climate for those who come behind her.

The task force is seeking feedback on the proposed 65-page Code of Conduct on student behavior from parents, teachers, administrators and others in the community. The entire draft document is available to download or read in English and Spanish on the district website at www.rcsdk12.org/CodeofConduct. The public is also encouraged to review a document comparing the existing and proposed codes (on the same web page) and complete the online survey **by Aug. 31**. Comments and suggestions may be emailed to CTF@racf.org. This input will be reviewed by task force members before it is submitted to the district’s Board of Education for adoption.

The task force stresses that the formation of the entire Code is an ongoing process and that meaningful community feedback is needed now so that it can begin to be introduced in the fall.

“The real work is in the implementation of the recommendations and the intent of the Code, ensuring a process that commits parents, teachers, students and administrators to work collaboratively to change the climate of their school,” says task force member Gladys Pedraza-Burgos, COO of Ibero-American Action League.

The Community Task Force has committed to a multi-year process to develop recommendations, engage a wide range of stakeholders, and guide effective implementation with the Rochester City School District to improve school climate for all.