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For Immediate Release

September 3, 2015

Task Force Makes Six New Recommendations to Improve School Climate in Rochester City School District

ROCHESTER — The Community Task Force on School Climate is recommending six ways the Rochester City School District can begin to address improving the environment in schools for students, for staff, and for parents.

These recommendations were developed by two work groups of the task force — “Family and Community Partnerships” and “Professional Development and Engaging Classrooms” — specifically to complement the recently released draft Code of Conduct for students that shifts school policy and action from punitive and exclusionary toward more inclusive, scholarly and joyful school cultures.

“Even as we support creation and implementation of a new Code, the task force is working very closely with the District on other measures intended to help schools create and maintain a positive learning environment,” says Spero Michailidis, member of the Community Task Force and a teacher with the Gandhi Institute.

The newly released recommendations, which will be sent to Superintendent Bolgen Vargas, reflect areas of early focus that the task force says are necessary for transforming district culture. There is an unprecedented emphasis on student, parent and teacher perspectives on what it will take to achieve really positive school culture; changes they believe will be evident through improved school climate.

Specific recommendations that the Community Task Force believes can be phased in this year to improve school climate encompass six areas:

- *Suspensions and restorative practices.* In all schools, introduce restorative practices that promote positive behavior and teach methods for resolving conflict peacefully. The group says school suspensions, expulsions or arrests should be used only as a last resort and that suspensions should never be used to punish violations of dress codes or cell-phone rules.
- *Resources for Supportive Alternatives.* Create “student help zones” in the eight K-8 schools where a staff member will be available to provide support or help a student cool off when needed to avoid a behavioral incident in the classroom.
- *Dialog related to suspensions.* Implement an emphasis on fairness in communication. When students are suspended, they should have the opportunity to talk with adults in school about what happened before the suspension and again before re-entering the classroom.
- *Professional Development in Anti-Racism.* Institute mandatory anti-racism professional development for District leadership and staff. Understanding the roles race plays in all of our lives and so much of our decision-making and developing strategies to mitigate the impact of racism in the District should begin with professional learning by the school board, the superintendent, and his cabinet. The group also asks the District to work with teachers to create a more culturally informed curriculum.
- *Student life.* Develop an Office of Student Life in each high school, modeled after those on college campuses and utilizing youth leadership development practices. focusing on student engagement, student voice, and quality of student life. These Offices of Student Life will engage students in setting the tone for a positive school climate, solicit student input on issues affecting them, and generally contribute to a vibrant school experience that makes students excited to come to school.
- *Parent engagement.* Establish a comprehensive approach to engaging parents that would combine the school-based employees who work with families into a unified structure with the District-level parent engagement office. Additional recommendations include a guidebook for students and parents written with their input.

From the beginning of its work almost a year ago, the Community Task Force understood that policy alone would not change school climate. Implementation of these recommendations is a first step toward positive change.

“As a mental health advocate and the parent of two current RCSD students as well as two RCSD graduates, I am keenly aware of the challenges that our students face. I also know that creating a culturally responsive environment that is attentive to the social-emotional needs of our children and youth can go a long way in mitigating trauma and creating an atmosphere where children love to learn and teachers love to teach,” said Melanie Funchess, director of community engagement with the Mental Health Association and a member of the Task Force.

“Providing students with multiple opportunities to participate in a wide range of positive, pro-social development and co-curricular activities will foster a sense of belonging and affirm that student voices matters,” says Gladys Pedraza-Burgos, COO of Ibero-American Action League and a member of the task force.

The Community Task Force is a unique collaboration between community groups, parents, students, teachers, mental health professionals, the Rochester City School District, parents, students, teachers and other school personnel, nonprofit leaders and community representatives. The task force of about 50 members has committed to a multi-year process that will guide effective implementation to improve school climate for all.

In July, the Task Force released a proposed 65-page Code of Conduct for students and is asking for community input **before September 19**. It is available to download or read in English and Spanish on the district website at www.rcsdk12.org/CodeofConduct, along with an online survey to provide feedback. Comments and suggestions also 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.