

RCS D ponders next steps for East-UR agreement

Questions swirl on what partnership's end means

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The University of Rochester's partnership with East High School will be coming to an end relatively soon. Exactly how soon and what that end will look like were the topic of conversation for the Rochester school board Thursday.

The agreement has allowed UR to serve as an educational partnership organization, or EPO. It set East apart within the district in certain ways, with more operational autonomy, its own administrative staff and separate collective bargaining agreements. In other ways, it remains part of RCS D.

"In the past, immunity from RCS D turbulence ... was essential to promote stability at East," East Superintendent Marlene Blocker said. "The potential to lose that autonomy is both daunting and frightening."

In less than a decade, the school's graduation rates have more than doubled.

The EPO agreement was first enacted in 2014, when the state Education Department told RCS D it needed to do something drastic with East, which was woefully under-serving students at the time.

The initial five-year agreement was extended for another five years in 2019. Since then, the partnership's most prominent backers have departed.

Board Vice President Beatriz LeBron noted that while East has been rising, other district schools, notably Franklin, have sunk just as low as East once was. "The reality is, this district can't afford East as it currently stands. It's not a sustainable model."

The contract runs out in June 2025. If it is to lapse, the district needs to start planning now for East's transition back into the fold.

Peluso asks board to let East EPO expire

Superintendent Carmine Peluso Thursday told the school board it is time to bring East back under full RCS D control.

Removing East's distinct legal status would create administrative efficiency, he argued, and change the perception that East is a separate entity.

He proposed that some of the things that set East apart — an extended school day, for instance — could be continued in separate contracts that don't have the full force of the EPO.

"In no way, shape or form do I want to remove those (assets) from East. It would be foolish for me to do that," he said. "I want to respect and honor the work that's there. But it has to be part of this district's portfolio."

Blocker requests short-term extension of East EPO

Blocker made a frank and impassioned argument for extending the agreement for at least two years past 2025. She sought to rebut some common criticisms regarding the demographics at the new East and argued that the district hasn't done enough to understand the work that's been done there.

"It's very hard for us to respect the request to return when we feel no one has even taken the time to understand what has been done," she said.

The state-sanctioned agreement, Blocker said, has been a "protective barrier" from chaos in the district, including changes in leadership. Peluso is the fourth permanent superintendent



East High School superintendent Marlene Blocker talks with students as she walks the halls at East Lower School. Every student she encountered called to her by name.

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dent since the partnership began.

UR too is seeking an extension of the agreement, its most prominent K-12 initiative in the city. In a statement, university spokesman Sara Miller said UR is "strongly committed to continuing the East EPO under the current model."

School Board President Cynthia Elliott, though, criticized university leadership for failing to reach out to the school board directly in recent years.

Has the East-UR partnership been successful?

The partnership with UR was first floated in May 2014, and the redesigned school opened in September 2015.

Progress from 2015 to 2024 has been steady and impressive, though problem areas remain.

- The four-year graduation rate increased from 33% to 78%.
- Suspensions are down from 2,468 in 2014-15 to 725 in 2022-23, though they are higher than they were before COVID.
- The percentage of ninth-graders earning five credits, a key indicator of progress toward graduation, increased from 49% to 76%.

Those results have been secured through painstaking changes to curriculum, school structure, teaching practices and data review. A revamped curriculum and other pedagogical tools have been made freely available to RCS D and other school districts.

And yet the school has not solved all its problems. Notably, both the lower school (grades 6-8) and upper school (9-12) both remain in state receivership. State test scores are stubbornly low in many subjects in the lower school, and more than two thirds of upper school students were chronically absent in 2022-23.

There was a dramatic uptick in violence

after students returned from COVID, demonstrating the way in which East students remain vulnerable to the same societal issues as their peers across the city.

Meanwhile, support for the school partnership has eroded somewhat. Van White, the school board president who first led the charge, left the school board in 2021. Shaun Nelms, who served as East's superintendent for eight years, left last year for a leadership position in UR.

How much does the East EPO cost RCS D?

The EPO has been a labor-intensive, and therefore costly, endeavor. It is the only school in RCS D with its own superintendent, its own assistant superintendent and its own chief academic officer.

East has about twice as many administrators and student support staff — counselors, social workers, librarians — compared to the median RCS D high school, according to state data. Overall it has 24.8 employees per 100 students compared to a district median of 18.1.

The school day is also longer than in the rest of the district. That allows for additional teacher planning time and professional development as well as student family groups, a key tenet of its social-emotional support model.

East has returned a portion of its budgeted funds each year, and the school's administrators have long quibbled with the way RCS D and the state calculate the exact difference in cost.

"Failure was expensive, too," Blocker said Thursday. "Especially when we had a 33% graduation rate."

But the cost for those additional employees, whatever it is, falls on the district; UR makes many in-kind contributions but puts no cash into the venture. That has led to concerns from some board members that other schools' interests are being sacrificed to maintain East's progress.

What happens next with the East EPO?

It was not apparent Thursday how the board will act; the majority of members stated no firm position. Elliott and LeBron said they oppose an extension and James Patterson said he supports one.

"I have no problem paying for education if education is working," Patterson said. "Over at East, you're the prime example of education working, and it should be a model."

The EPO agreement is technically between the Rochester school board and UR, but the state Education Department looms behind it. While the contractual language leaves room for interpretation, it seems most likely the state Education Commissioner Betty Rosa has the ultimate authority to decide whether the agreement remains or expires.

State Education Department representatives said only that the department "continue(s) to work with the district and the University to review next steps regarding the EPO agreement."

The school board will seek a firmer statement of Rosa's position as well as more financial information and a tentative idea of what a transition back to the district would look like. It likely will give Peluso some final direction later this month.

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