

# The Rochester Contract: A Status Report

Photographs courtesy the Rochester City Schools



This page: Two students in the Primary Approach to Learning program at Elementary School #37 learn a new language, one of many magnet programs available to elementary students. Photograph by Gelfand-Piper.

Opposite: In downtown Rochester, students from the School Without Walls conduct a video interview, a typical activity in this alternative to the traditional. Photograph by Ann Pearlman

Drastic problems require drastic remedies. This philosophy underlies the contract between the Rochester City School District and the Rochester Teachers' Association/American Federation of Teachers.

Urban school districts like Rochester's are best described as America's "educational intensive care units." Consider the evidence from our district:

- About 68 percent of Rochester's 33,000 students are minorities, and at least 40 percent live below the poverty level.
- About 27 percent of 16- to 19-year-olds are unemployed, with some city neighborhoods suffering 80 percent unemployment rates for teens.
- More than 2,500 youths under age 16 are arrested every year in our county.
- An estimated 63 percent of 7th and 8th graders and 83 percent of 9th

and 10th graders use drugs or alcohol.

- About 62 percent of all 9th grade students have failed at least one grade.
- Among 7th, 8th, and 9th graders in non-college-bound courses, more than 40 percent fail English, math, social studies, or science.

- In secondary schools, over 60 percent of black students and 20 percent of white students fail a grade.

- Approximately 80 percent of entering kindergartners test one or two years behind in readiness skills.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, these students are at risk. How will schools meet the challenge they present? As educators, we have two choices: we can wait for the children to change, or we can change the system to make it more responsive to children's needs.

## How Schools Must Change

Five years after *A Nation At Risk*, there is no shortage of reform ideas or commission reports. But there is great

By granting teachers greater empowerment and higher compensation in return for closer involvement with students, Rochester City School District is seeking to make public schools successful for all students.

danger that we may remain permanently perched on the brink of revolution without accomplishing anything of substance. We must take action to translate the abundant rhetoric into local practical reality.

The problem with today's schools is not that they are no longer as good as they once were. The problem with today's schools is that they are precisely what they always were—while the world around them has changed so significantly. Today's schools were designed at the turn of the century, when our economy was based on the factory model and the mass production system. Students were products; their teachers, hired hands on an educational assembly line. Obviously, this is not the way to prepare the next generation of students to *think* for a living.

Schools must be restructured as centers of inquiry and reflection—not of unexamined tradition. We must em-



phasize critical thinking skills and cooperative learning, taking into account different types of intelligence and different learning styles. We must reconsider how we allocate time, use space, classify students, and divide subject matter. We must question even the most hallowed practices and assumptions: that one building means one school; that children learn best in 47-minute segments, sitting passively in rows; that norm-referenced multiple-choice tests are the best indices of student learning; that teaching is telling, learning is accumulating, and knowledge is facts.

### **The Impetus for Change**

In 1985, a community-wide initiative to improve Rochester's schools, spearheaded by the local chapter of the Urban League, focused attention on the needs of our schools. Reform efforts gained impetus when Peter McWalters became Acting Superintendent of Schools later that year.

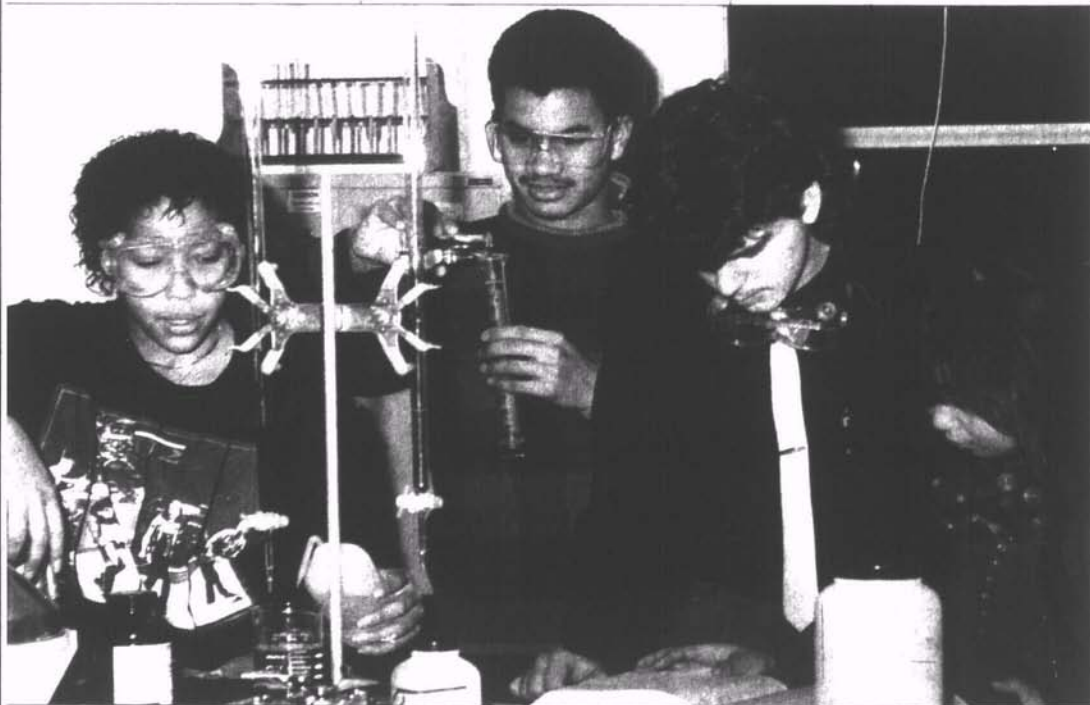
McWalters showed no qualms about engaging teachers as full partners in the effort to improve schools. When negotiating our teachers' contract, he readily agreed to consider the "professional" issues that are, technically, permissive and not mandatory items of bargaining. During contract negotiations, everything was on the table: management prerogatives no less than accountability.

Rochester's three-year teachers' contract, now in its second year, should be perceived as a transitional document. The contract is, in many important respects, a series of "agreements to agree." On certain key reform issues we negotiated the parameters and a timetable for implementation, leaving the details to be hammered out later. We wanted to engage teachers by involving them directly in determining specifics: staffing for restructured secondary schools, the functions of lead teachers, school-based planning, "Home Base Guidance," and so on.

They continue to do this through open forums, written input, and informal channels.

Most important is the spirit of the contract: that collective bargaining can build a genuine profession for teachers; that unionism and professionalism are complementary, not mutually exclusive; that the contract ought to serve as the floor, not the ceiling, for what teachers are willing to do for students; and that there can be no accountability without empowerment nor empowerment without accountability.

After this process of dialogue, we now share widespread commitment to a common agenda of excellence and equity. The old adversarial stances have been replaced by an unprecedented degree of collaboration: the superintendent of schools is a proponent of teacher empowerment while the teachers' union president is an advocate of teacher accountability. We are determined to break the cycle of



*Students conduct lab work in a special science and technology program at Wilson Magnet High School, one of Rochester's "Schools of Choice."  
Photograph by Max Lent*

failure by breaking the cycle of blaming each other.

### Peer Assistance and Review

No one knows the difference between good and bad teaching better than good teachers themselves. Therefore, good teachers should be involved in deciding who should enter the profession and who should remain in it. Through the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program, our teachers play a significant role in making these decisions. This practice fosters professional autonomy.

In 1986, more than a year before the current contract was negotiated, we had proposed, and the district had agreed to, the PAR program. The goal of this cooperative program is to provide help to new teachers (in the form of internships) and to improve the performance of tenured teachers who are having severe difficulties (by means of intervention). Internship is now a condition of employment for newly hired teachers without experience; the intervention component of the PAR program occurs in addition to—not in lieu of—existing due process. Mentor teachers make recommendations to the PAR panel regarding whether an intern or a teacher on intervention should be continued.

Tenured teachers may be recommended for intervention only by their supervisors, who must do so in writing, indicating the nature of the problems and what has already been done to remedy them. The supervisor must state that all reasonable efforts to help the teacher have been exhausted. The governing panel, composed of four teachers appointed by the teachers' union and three administrators appointed by the superintendent, reviews the referral and determines whether the teacher is indeed in need of intervention. The review process is strictly confidential; only the outcome is made known in any subsequent proceedings.

In 1987, the PAR program was incorporated into the new contract as part of the Career In Teaching Plan, which creates a four-tiered profession:

- *Intern teachers*—new practitioners without experience, who must teach under the guidance of mentor teachers;
- *Resident teachers*—teachers who



*Multicultural activities are important in the Rochester curriculum, including this guest artist's appearance at School #12. Photograph by Ann Pearman*

have successfully completed a year of internship but have not yet achieved tenure or permanent certification;

- *Professional teachers*—teachers who have earned permanent certification and tenure;

- *Lead teachers*—teachers selected by a joint panel of teachers and administrators, who teach at least half-time. They have at least 10 years' experience and are paid a salary differential. Lead teachers also work as mentors or as consultants, selecting textbooks, writing curriculums, and planning staff development programs. They may work with students at risk, teach in remedial and enrichment programs, serve as adjunct professors in local teacher education schools, and perform other duties requiring their level of expertise.

The Career In Teaching Plan provides logical role definitions, a career path, and incentives for current and prospective teachers in the Rochester Public Schools. The plan allows the Rochester City School District to make more effective use of teacher expertise, to increase the reliability of teacher evaluations by diversifying them, to reward long-term commitment to teaching in the Rochester Public Schools, and to recruit and retain

outstanding teachers. And, perhaps most important for learning, the Career In Teaching Plan permits matching the most challenging teaching assignments with the most experienced teachers.

### Compensation Restructured

If we were to attract and retain the best teachers available, salaries in Rochester had to become competitive. Therefore, the Rochester contract includes substantial increases in pay, especially for beginning teachers. In the 1987-88 school year, all teachers received a salary increase of \$4,500. This increase raised the base salary from \$18,983 to \$23,483—an increase of nearly 24 percent in one year for first-year teachers. Starting pay was increased by 52 percent during the three years of the life of the contract. For experienced teachers at the highest level of the pay scale, the new salary became \$46,753—an increase of approximately 10 percent. The average increase for 1987-88 was more than 14 percent.

In the 1988-89 and 1989-90 contract years, salaries increase 11 percent each year. The base salary is now \$26,067 and will be \$28,935 next year. Top salaries now reach \$51,563 and will be \$57,335 next year. Thus the average teacher salary in Rochester will climb from \$32,651 in 1986-87 to more than \$45,774 in 1989-90. (These figures do not take into account the Lead Teacher differential of up to 20 percent more.)

An important feature of the salary settlement is the condensed salary schedule. The revised index is designed to reflect the Career In Teaching Plan lanes (Intern, Resident, Professional, and Lead) and to permit teachers to reach maximum pay in 12 years instead of 26. The transition to the new index for teachers now on the

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payroll is based on teachers' salaries and status on the Career In Teaching scale rather than on years of service alone.

### **The Home Base Guidance Program**

In exchange for higher salaries, Rochester teachers agreed to work a longer school year and to expand the "Home Base Guidance" program into every middle school and high school in the district. This program assigns each teacher approximately 20 students for personal attention, informal counseling, and general supervision. The goal is to provide a caring adult in each school for each and every student. (Elementary schools, where teachers have far fewer students, can achieve this goal without a formal program.) Home Base Guidance teachers become case managers: they are responsible for home contacts and for nurturing their 20 charges during their stays in that school. Because the functional details are developed collaboratively in each school, different schools have different versions of the model, but the purpose of each school's plan is to address the affective needs of students for support, adult friendship, and mentoring.

### **School-Based Planning**

School-based planning may be the most important and promising agreement in the new contract. A shared governance process for decision making at the school level, it empowers all major stakeholders: parents, teachers, administrators, and, in high schools, students. Individuals from all these groups may serve on school-based planning teams, but the majority must be teachers.

School-based planning teams decide on school budgets, school dynamics, instructional goals, and other important matters. They can even determine how to fill certain staff vacancies, rather than adhering to strict seniority provisions. (For example, voluntary transfers used to be made strictly by seniority. Now school-based planning teams review all applications, interview the applicants, and select the candidate most compatible with the school's needs and ethos. Seniority may, but need not, be a

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consideration.) When their decisions vary from school board policies or from the negotiated contract, school-based planning teams can seek to waive such constraints. This process thus grants empowerment where it matters most—at the school and classroom levels—and gives greater ownership to all who must abide by decisions and be accountable for results.

### **One Year Later**

After the first year of implementation, it is abundantly clear that change generates anxiety and resistance. Understandably, school administrators in Rochester are uneasy about the changes promoted by the teachers' union and by the district. Some worry that teacher empowerment will curtail administrators' traditional prerogatives. Their union, the Administrators' and Supervisors' Association of Rochester (ASAR), filed a suit against the district and the teachers' union even before the new contract was negotiated.

Indeed, we cannot develop new roles for teachers without affecting the

traditional roles of school administrators. But shared governance in schools and an autonomous teaching profession need not diminish administrators' functions. Phillip Schlechty, Director of the Gheens Academy, put it best: "Teachers should be leaders, and administrators, leaders of leaders." This perspective can help to reorient our thinking toward a more productive and collegial system.

The litigation filed by ASAR in the New York State Supreme Court against the Peer Assistance and Review program was unsuccessful. Nonetheless, ASAR appealed the ruling, indicating continuing uneasiness about the reform agenda in Rochester. At present, the appeal is still pending.

### **Chances of Success**

The success of the Rochester experiment will hinge on whether we are given time to succeed. We see great danger in the public's demand for immediate dramatic results. Nevertheless, I am confident we won't fail. By changing opportunities, we are already changing attitudes. By surviving crises, we are building confidence in our own commitment to our common goals. By challenging past practices, we are enhancing the prospect of real change. And by ensuring that adults work cooperatively, we are improving the chances that students will achieve more, both academically and socially.

Of course, there are no guarantees. Whether the new contract will improve student outcomes in Rochester remains to be seen. We are attempting to make public schools successful for all of our students—including the poor, the foreign-born, the economically and educationally disadvantaged. It won't be easy, but the risks are well worth taking, and the risks of *not* trying are even greater. □

1. These statistics are taken from the Rochester City School District's *Data Report, 1987-1988*.

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