

# CASE STUDY: ROCHESTER

Case study to Richard D. Kahlenberg and Clifford B. Janey,  
“Putting Democracy Back Into Education”

Clifford Janey | November 10, 2016

In the wake of growing tensions among leaders of the education reform movement, the debate about democracy in public schools gets lost. Such was the case in Rochester, New York. When I arrived in 1995, Rochester—the poorest city in upstate Monroe County—still had high expectations for its children, families, and communities. It was clear to leaders representing unions, city hall, the business community, the school board and, of course, the media that great teaching will always matter. But how do you create equal access for great teaching, grounded in the principles of democracy? And how do we ensure equal access to challenging classes?

## COLLABORATION TO IMPROVE TEACHING

Rochester City School District (RCSD), like other urban districts, explored lots of ideas and innovative practices through district policy and collective bargaining agreements. However, variation in learning persisted. Without a sufficient supply of quality

teachers, opportunities to close the teaching gap were diminishing as the inequality divide widened. And, high stakes testing accelerated the divide, denying equal access to rich curricula, exceptional pedagogy, content knowledge, and instructional strategies that characterize the foundation of excellent teaching. But how do you create access to great teaching?

Upon arriving in Rochester in the sweltering summer of 1995, the city was embroiled in heated debates and discussions around its status as the twelfth-poorest urban center in the country. Poverty, given its reach and depth, presented formidable challenges to schools, families, and communities. There was a pressing need to inspire the general public with an agenda that was not grounded in good will alone. Parents and residents had witnessed a series of union-led, district-supported education reforms. At the center of the reforms was improving teaching quality, mentoring new teachers, and upgrading skill sets of veteran teachers. Creating good schools requires more than good teaching. Good

communities require more than family health support systems, continuous education for career employment opportunities, and access to nurturing environments. Good schools in good communities have a clear intersection, but do not always find the preferred route to collaboration. It was within this context that I sought a sustainable source of change.

In 1987, RCSD had adopted a path-breaking peer assistance and review program to support struggling teachers and remove ineffective ones. But by the mid-1990s, the program needed to be updated. So in 1996, the district introduced a “professional support” program that provided confidential mentoring to any teacher who wanted it.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the district’s best recruitment efforts, it suffered an inexcusable loss of good teachers. The plan to stem this loss involved collaborative strategies between the teachers’ union and the district leadership, which resulted in a new collective bargaining agreement. In my view, the mentoring program was in business terms a clear return on investment. For parents, it meant their child had a good teacher, and one less worry. In 2000, the mentoring program provided instruction, guidance, and support to 593 new teachers, which enabled the retention rate for Rochester’s teachers to reach an average of 86.6 percent, well above the national norm. While realizing the benefits of mentoring, I also had concerns about the selection process. What I found was that mentors were selected more for how they mentored, and not enough for the ongoing excellence that they demonstrated as a teacher. In my mind, they needed both.

## INCLUSION OF MINORITY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

The other major area for improvement involved the inclusion of minority and special education students

in challenging and enriching classes. In 1995, when I arrived in Rochester, it was not considered a bustling-growth city, but it was still in the midst of a highly attractive regional economy. For students, college and career opportunities meant being academically ready, and being ready meant having access to courses and curricula that facilitated a successful high school narrative and graduation.

However, in a response to community complaints about access and inequality, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights conducted an investigation and confirmed three finding of major concern:

1. over-representation of black and Hispanic students in out-of-school suspensions;
2. over-representation of black and Hispanic students referred to and classified in special education; and
3. under-representation of black and Hispanic students in high level academic course sequence for college honors, independent study, and advanced placement.

My briefing by the Department of Education was comprehensive and compelling, but did not require any affirmative action on my account. More precisely, the findings that were confirmed about eighth grade academic performance of black and Hispanic students were that, even when those students’ performance was equal to or higher than their white classmates, no corrective action was required.

When I arrived in Rochester, the eighth-grade minority students who in the report had been deemed eligible for higher level courses were now in the tenth grade. Two years had lapsed since the release of the report, and while the district had not been required to take

any affirmative corrective action, I did so immediately. The rules of fairness would not indicate otherwise. In retrospect, to do nothing would have relegated high schools to segregation holding pens for talented minority students, where the legacy left by Thurgood Marshall would find its way to darkness. It was Marshall who said “history teaches that grave threats to liberty often come in these times of urgency when constitutional rights seem too extravagant to endure.” Through collaboration, Rochester became a better place to live and learn.

By law, public school districts must serve all students, regardless of race, income, and ability. But in today’s urban environments, there are notable exceptions. Issues of race, income, and ability become not just a state of being, but a matter of policy with unintended consequences.

Another lesson learned from the RCSD is its concern for social justice for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are protected against discrimination under the Individual Disabilities Education Act and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. The Rochester narrative makes the case for students with disabilities to have reasonable accommodations when included in effective classrooms, as well as their involvement in extra curricula activities, that were not inclusive of them before. From the 1998–1999 to 2001–2002 school years, the proportion of special education students included in regular classes increased by 41.1 percentage points at the elementary level, 48.8 percentage points at the middle school level, and 39.1 percentage points at the high school level. Judge Michael A. Teleseca, the presiding judge, wrote in 2002, “...the school district has ample evidence of wholesale system-wide reform in the way it provides special education services to special needs students.<sup>2</sup> I was encouraged by the shared value of social justice among parents, advocates, and school staff, especially teachers and principals. Their indefatigable efforts account not only for the high

inclusion rates, significant reduction of the achievement gap and confidence by the Federal District Court that we had the will and capacity to continue democratic principles of inclusion in support of students with disabilities.

## ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

While I was serving as superintendent of schools in Rochester from 1995–2002, academic achievement was universally defined as having demonstrated a pattern of appreciable growth among all subgroups on the English language arts (ELA) and mathematics state assessment tests in grades four and eight. The data show that, over a three year period (2000, 2001 and 2002) the RCSD had more consistent and greater gains for two minority subgroups (African American and Hispanic) as compared to the same subgroups at the state level. Also, RCSD made great strides in closing the achievement gap between white and African American students on the eighth grade ELA in New York State. The gap between African American and white students for eighth grade ELA was 12.1 percent in 2000, and 6 percent in 2002, compared to the state level at 16.6 percent in 2000 and 12.3 percent in 2002. At that time, the new assessments did not set the school district back; rather, they gave us a new challenge that proved to be within our reach.

EDITOR’S NOTE: This report, published on November 10, 2016, was slightly modified on November 28, 2016 with an addition to the Rochester case study reflecting increased proportions of special education students included in regular classes there during the 1998–1999 and 2001–2002 school years.

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**Clifford B. Janey** is a senior research scholar at Boston University’s School of Education. He was state district superintendent of Newark, New Jersey, from 2008 to 2011; superintendent of schools in Washington, D.C., from 2004 to

2007; and superintendent of schools in Rochester, New York, from 1995 to 2002. He has also been a Senior Weismann Fellow at Bankstreet College of Education in New York City, as well as vice president of education at Scholastic, Inc.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harvard University Graduate School of Education Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, “A User’s Guide to Peer Assistance and Review: PAR in Rochester,” (n.d). <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par/practice/rochester.html>.

<sup>2</sup> This data on the increase of special education students included in regular classes in Rochester schools was added, as supporting evidence, to this case study on November 28, 2016. It is derived from: Marie Cianca, “Inclusion Progress in Rochester City School District,” Urban Perspectives, Summer/Fall 2002, 8–9.