

# Coalition develops fellowship to address local education

A local coalition of child and family advocates has developed the Rochester Education Fellowship, which will enable a leader to co-create and build a new, community-centered vision for bold, transformation change for Rochester's public school systems.

The coalition is looking for candidates who are entrepreneurial, have experience in executive-level leadership, deep knowledge of local needs and a focus on equitable outcomes for all Rochester students and families. Applications for the two-year fellowship will be accepted until March 26 and the selected fellow will be announced in July.

"The current challenges facing marginalized students and families are deeply embedded in the design of the systems of our nation and the city of Rochester," said Jerome Underwood, president and CEO of Action for a Better Community and selection committee co-chair. "However, systems designed to produce inequitable outcomes can be redesigned to produce a greater quality of life for all in our community. The members of the Rochester Education Fellow Selection Committee believe there is great promise for aligned community members and leaders to reimagine Rochester's public school systems with the needs of Black, Brown and economically marginalized families and students at the center."

Students in Rochester face a number of obstacles to successful academic and life outcomes, officials noted. Some 44 percent of students under the age of 18 in Rochester are living in poverty and student achievement is among the lowest of any urban district in the country, with just 8 percent of students in grades 3-8 mastering math and reading on grade level.

The arrival of COVID-19 intensified the challenges of educating Rochester's most vulnerable families,

with the digital divide heightening inequities, officials said. The Rochester Education Fellowship Selection Committee believes transformative leadership is needed now to create a movement of bold, systemic change for Rochester students. "I served in the Rochester school system for many years, and as a longtime educator, I view the challenges facing our children's education through the lens of a hands-on teacher. With this insight, I believe that the Rochester Education Fellowship is a very thoughtfully designed solution to a complex challenge. Nothing is more important than ensuring our children have access to the best education possible, and I believe this initiative will dramatically improve outcomes for underserved students in Rochester," said Rita Gaither, retired Rochester educator and founder of Pearl Resources Inc.

The fellow will have access to a wide variety of support from local and national partners, including leadership development, personalized executive coaching and a commitment of support and collaboration from anchor Rochester organizations to ensure they and the organization they launch have a lasting impact.

"I was born and raised in Rochester and know the struggles children here face. I couldn't be a bigger believer in the importance of ensuring all children have equitable access to a well-rounded education that includes the arts, culture and social justice," said Avenue Blackbox Theatre Founder Reenah Golden. "I am proud to serve on the selection committee with these established local leaders as we work together to push the needle forward creating opportunities for Rochester's youth."

The Rochester Education Fellowship Selection Committee is co-chaired by Underwood and Holli Budd, executive director of the Max and Marian Farash Charitable Foundation, two organizations

with a strong history of supporting the city's youth and families.

Additional selection committee members include:

- Angelica Perez-Delgado, the Ibero American Action League
- LaShunda Leslie-Smith, Connected Communities
- Dirk Hightower, the Children's Institute
- Mellanye Nesmith, ABC's Policy Council and local parent
- Rick DeJesus-Rueff, community member
- Reenah Golden, Avenue Blackbox Theatre
- Dr. Rita Gaither, retired Rochester educator, founder Pearl Resources Inc.
- Sekou Biddle, UNCF
- David Harris, the City Fund

The committee will lead the search and selection process for the fellow, and will also provide support during the two-year fellowship.

"There are many deep and interconnected challenges in the way of providing equitable and quality education to Rochester's children, including poverty, segregation and high leadership turnover. There is an urgent and deep need for transformational, systemic change that is in alignment with the community," Budd said. "We are intensely aware of the challenges Rochester children and families face and are committed to the long-lasting work needed to turn the tide."

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