



February 20, 2025

Dear Students, Families, and Supporters of the Rochester P-TECH Program,

I am writing to update you on an important development in the life of our P-TECH program in Rochester and to outline the steps that we are taking to address the issue that has emerged.

Earlier this month, a number of P-TECH students who are in their senior year of high school and their parents reached out to the leaders of P-TECH to ask what level of funding P-TECH students will receive to support continued study at Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC) after they graduate from high school. Those questions prompted the leaders of P-TECH to inform me of something that I had not heard or read before, which is that when the first cohort of P-TECH students was recruited in the spring of 2021, those students and their parents and guardians were told that the program would provide a “cost-free education in grades 9-14”. The P-TECH leaders informed me that some (if not all) of the students and parents who joined the program during its early years interpreted that statement to mean that P-TECH students will be provided with funding for two full years of postsecondary education in any subject area at RCTC after they graduate from high school.

Unfortunately, sufficient funding to cover the cost of two years of postsecondary study at RCTC for all P-TECH students has never been included in the P-TECH budget and is not in the P-TECH budget today. The cost of P-TECH is currently covered by funding from the State of Minnesota, and all those funds are used to cover the expense of providing students with coursework and educational support while the students are enrolled in high school and take Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) classes at RCTC. State funding for P-TECH in Rochester will be phasing down over the next several years due to recent changes in state law, and Rochester Public Schools (RPS) will assume the cost of paying for the program while students are enrolled in high school through funding from the 2024 Ignite Student Learning referendum and through PSEO funding from the State of Minnesota.

I joined Rochester Public Schools as superintendent in July of 2021, just as the first cohort of P-TECH students was beginning their time in the program in 9th grade. From the first moment I heard about P-TECH and in every discussion I have had about the program with RPS staff and our partners at RCTC, IBM, and Mayo Clinic since that time, I have heard the program described as an “early college model”, in which students earn their postsecondary credential or degree at the same time as they earn a high school diploma. I am pleased to share that some P-TECH students in the current senior class will attain this objective, but most will need to complete additional coursework after they graduate from high school to earn their degree in practical nursing or their associate’s degree in information technology. Fortunately, P-TECH students who are

now in 11th, 10th, and 9th grades have earned more PSEO credits than the students who started the program four years ago, and so we anticipate that more of them will be able to earn their high school diplomas and postsecondary degrees at the same time as they graduate from high school in the years ahead.

This situation is complicated by the fact that Minnesota law explicitly prohibits using PSEO funding to cover the cost of postsecondary education for high school graduates in our state. Minnesota law also prohibits delaying a student's high school graduation in order to allow them to earn credit at a postsecondary institution. In some states that operate P-TECH models, state law allows the student to remain enrolled in the K-12 district and allows the school district to delay granting their high school diploma while the student completes their coursework at the postsecondary institution. Unfortunately, we have recently confirmed with the school district's legal counsel that the laws governing PSEO in Minnesota explicitly prohibit that practice.

I deeply regret the confusion that has arisen regarding this issue, and since I learned about this concern at the start of the month I have worked with our team to find a path forward that supports P-TECH students while also recognizing that RPS has very limited funding and authority to support their study at RCTC after they have graduated from our school district. I should add that RCTC also has limited funding to support tuition and expenses for RCTC students, and state laws and college policies require the college to focus that funding on students with a demonstrated financial need. Unfortunately, analysis that RPS staff has conducted over the past month suggests that a relatively limited number of our current P-TECH students will qualify for grants and scholarships that will cover the full cost of study at RCTC.

With all of that as background, the rest of this letter outlines the strategy that we have developed to support our current P-TECH students after they graduate from high school while also recognizing the financial and legal limitations that I have outlined above.

Rochester Public Schools will allocate funding to cover the cost of tuition and expenses for P-TECH students who graduate from high school to enable them to complete their programs in practical nursing and information technology. P-TECH students who qualify for financial assistance from RCTC following high school graduation will also utilize those funds to cover the cost of tuition and expenses at RCTC. Students will work with P-TECH staff, including the P-TECH College Liaison, to work through the RCTC financial assistance process to identify scholarships, grants, and other financial aid for which they would be eligible.

For the students who are currently enrolled in P-TECH who are now in 9th-12th grades, RPS will cover the following costs of postsecondary study at RCTC:

1. Tuition and fees not already covered by financial aid for RCTC courses required for completion of a student's identified P-TECH 535 program of study toward the Practical Nursing Diploma or the AAS degree in Information Technology
2. Required textbooks for courses included in item #1. Textbooks must be purchased through the RCTC Bookstore at the most cost-effective level.
3. The expenses of tuition, fees, and required textbooks outlined above will be covered only for courses that are completed within a student's first two academic

years following their high school graduation. For example, if a student is a current senior and earns a high school diploma from RPS in 2025, the student would have until the end of RCTC's Spring 2027 semester to complete their program of study in practical nursing or information technology.

4. In order for students who are currently enrolled in P-TECH to become and remain eligible for RPS-supported postsecondary funding, they must meet the following criteria:
 - Students must be enrolled in the identified postsecondary program of study at RCTC no later than the fall after high school graduation. This includes meeting the minimum admission requirements for both RCTC and the program of study prior to the start of the first Fall semester after high school graduation
 - Students must be in good academic standing and be making consistent and satisfactory progress toward program completion.

For students who are not yet enrolled in P-TECH, such as current 8th grade students who have recently been selected to begin participating in the P-TECH program in the fall of 2025, we will formally adopt the early college model in which students will have the opportunity, during grades 9-12, to earn both their high school diploma and a postsecondary diploma in licensed practical nursing or an Associate's Degree in Information Technology from RCTC through PSEO funding. Students will begin postsecondary coursework as early as 10th grade and persist in their studies through high school graduation. Additionally, students will have the opportunity to earn industry certifications such as Certified Nursing Assistant and digital certifications in IT-related fields. Students will engage in work-based learning opportunities such as volunteering at Mayo Clinic and participating in paid summer internships at IBM.

However, we will also make clear to those students and their families that at present we cannot guarantee funding for continued study at RCTC following high school graduation if the student does not complete their pathway program by the time they graduate from high school.

Looking ahead, we will work with the P-TECH partner organizations and with others in our community to evaluate the possibility of covering those costs from donations and other philanthropic sources. Other P-TECH programs across the country have been successful in achieving that objective, and so it may be possible to do so in Rochester as well. However, before we make such a commitment, we need to reach out to potential donors to evaluate their interest in supporting P-TECH and build a philanthropic program to cover those costs. We will keep P-TECH students, families, and our community updated on that effort as we develop our broader strategy to increase philanthropic funding to support all RPS schools and students in the years ahead.

Once again, I regret the confusion that has recently arisen regarding funding for the postsecondary component of this valuable program, but I hope that the strategy outlined here addresses some of the concerns that P-TECH parents have recently expressed. While the financial resources available to our school district are limited, I am confident

that the plan outlined here will enable us to help all eligible P-TECH students complete their programs of study and go on to find jobs in nursing and information technology that open the doors to lives of progress and opportunity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kent Pekel".

Kent Pekel, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools