

Cornell Office &  
Rural Schools Program

Cornell University  
Warren Hall 275 Flex  
Ithaca, NY 14853



Latham Office  
24 Century Hill Drive,  
Suite 200-A  
Latham, NY 12110  
[dal295@cornell.edu](mailto:dal295@cornell.edu)  
Tel: 518-250-5710  
Cell: 518-888-4598

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**TESTIMONY**

**RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK STATE**

**BEFORE THE**

**NEW YORK STATE JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING**

**Wednesday January 26, 2022**

**TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY**

**DAVID A. LITTLE, Esq.**

**Executive Director**

Dear Chairs Weinstein, Kreuger and Committee Members,

I am David Little, Executive Director of the Rural Schools Association of New York State, testifying today on behalf of nearly one half of our state's school districts and one third of our students. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about the plight of our rural schools, the communities that support them and the dramatically inadequate addressing of their needs by our state. While many are applauding the state's "historic" commitment to fully funding the existing Foundation Aid school funding formula, the current approach is in fact making the rich richer and the poor poorer. Following a full year of implementing the approach, this can no longer be considered an unintended consequence.

The Executive Budget Briefing Book declares that following next year's fulfilment of the promise to address the lingering deficit in Foundation Aid, all schools will have been provided equitable resources. Nothing could be further from the truth. An investment will have been made to be sure, but the disparity in distribution will have been exacerbated. Prior to the decision to fully fund Foundation Aid within three years, the state held hearings to determine its best course of action. Throughout those hearings urban education advocates consistently claimed that the existing formula must be fully funded before the state could determine whether the formula was "broken." This was of course, absurd. It's a mathematical formula and has predictive value. In fully funding the existing (more than a decade old) formula, the state deliberately chose to provide the lion's share of resources to urban and high wealth school districts (that remained underfunded from Gap Elimination Adjustment decreases a decade ago.) It ignored population loss in rural areas. It ignored skyrocketing poverty rates in rural areas. It ignored increased isolation stemming from geography and the lack of broadband access, forcing rural children into what amounted to solitary confinement during the pandemic.

Rather than determine the current cost of providing a sound, basic education you collectively chose to fund a formula that can no longer be applied to 42% of school districts. You chose to fund a formula that this year is insufficient even to provide an inflationary increase to high need rural school districts; while you send untold millions to the wealthiest and (perhaps not unrelatedly) most politically relevant areas of the our state. This is not the historic fulfilment of a promise. It is an unconscionable distribution of the people's funds in a manner that (after next year, when full funding is complete) will leave rural school districts and their students at an impossible lifelong educational disadvantage. You will have done nothing to either adequately fund your existing rural educational structure or to support a new, more efficient educational delivery system. You will have supported new urban teachers with student loan forgiveness without similarly addressing the devastating inability of rural districts to attract and retain staff. You will have enriched our state's wealthiest districts at the expense of those most in need among us. This result is anything but historic. Sadly, it's the norm.

**After having studied the best way to provide aid, having embarked last year down the path of full funding and seen that our wealthiest school districts were helped the most, having been provided unprecedented state and federal resources to support your actions, I must ask:**

## **What are your hopes and dreams for our state's children in your rural schools?**

1. You know that while almost all rural students graduate high school, they have a dismal rate of success in higher education (and there are fewer employment opportunities waiting at home.) You know that the reason is that they must pay for remedial coursework prior to beginning their chosen course of study; remedial work that should have been provided to them in the form of advanced study in high school. You pay for those courses in your urban and suburban schools and yet, not in your rural ones.
2. You know that all of our surrounding neighbor states have had regional high schools for their rural areas for generations and that these high schools have been successful in providing the broader curricula and advanced coursework needed to make rural students competitive with their urban and suburban counterparts... and yet year after year, you take no action whatever.
3. You know that broadband access is an immediate and overpowering educational need and yet state efforts to address the situation have been tepid at best. In fact, you hold to the fallacy (perpetrated by vendors) that most of the state is already provided broadband access and that our only real remaining concern is affordability in urban minority communities.
4. You know that other states have offered student loan forgiveness, provided housing, offered a four day school week to encourage new teachers to come to rural school districts and yet, you choose to ignore the inability of rural school districts to secure qualified educators.
5. You know that the current rate of inflation is over 3% and yet you assign a 3% increase to rural school districts; forcing cuts in a time when all other school districts are receiving unheard of increases.
6. You know that the executive would shift \$5 billion into reserves before addressing historic inequities in funding and without empaneling a commission to study present day requirements of the state's constitutional responsibility of providing an education to each of its children.
7. You know that rural school districts are reliant upon their BOCES and yet the Executive Budget does nothing to address the reimbursement rate that would allow participation in vital programs and services.
8. You know that our rural school districts are wholly dependent upon transportation for their students and yet the Executive Budget would impose a mandate that school buses have zero emissions within five years. Are you aware that there is no zero emission bus currently in existence capable of the range needed to transport students in rural areas? If it were, its cost would be beyond the ability of rural districts to purchase, given that many such districts raise what would amount to a quarter of the cost of such a bus under their average tax cap (without addressing any other need within the district whatsoever!)

The goal is appropriate but should be supported by the research and financial commitment needed to implement it without eviscerating other aspects of the educational program in rural communities.

This is merely a sampling of potential consequences of the state's current approach to the funding of its rural school districts. The list itself is far more extensive and damaging.

There are many aspects of the Executive Budget that are laudable. Most certainly it is notable for devoting tremendous resources in total to public education; over a number of years, providing stability. Also noteworthy is the fact that unlike previous submittals, it does not attempt to shift costs from the state to local school districts. It includes a number of innovative and potentially helpful proposals. However, the failure to treat rural districts equitably is so glaring as to obviate the plan's positive aspects. It begs the question of where rural schools and their students will be after they have scrimped to save even existing programs over the next few years, while their wealthy counterparts reap huge increases in state support?

#### **IS IT TRULY YOUR INTENT TO CREATE A SECOND CLASS OF NEW YORK STATE RESIDENTS?**

Lack of familiarity with the rural experience is an understandable consequence of the fact that our state financial and educational leaders come from an urban and suburban background. Yet, empathy for and understanding of the implications of its policy decisions is the responsibility of leadership. For a decade New York State willfully ignored the historic outward migration of its residents for fear of deterring businesses from locating within the state. It has addressed the needs of others because they are more politically powerful, their advocates more vocal. Continuing on this path may well lead to an irrevocable deterioration of massive geographic regions of our state, creating an overreliance on our urban economy to support our state. Within our lifetimes, we have at times seen that urban economic base crumble. If it were to do so without the underlying support of our rural economy, the state's ability to fund the services required by our most vulnerable would be jeopardized. Ignoring the educational needs of our rural children creates an unstable future for the State of New York.

On behalf of not only the hundreds of thousands of children in New York State rural schools, but of our state's very future, I implore you to reassess the funding of public education, create a commission to determine the cost of providing a sufficient education for all children and use this unprecedented merger of available state and federal resources to reallocate sufficient rural funding to address its longstanding challenges.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Respectfully,

*David A. Little*

Executive Director

Rural Schools Assn. of NYS

**NOTE: For additional information about our state's approach to its rural schools, I have attached a pdf of the policy brief *The FORGOTTEN FAMILY MEMBER: NEW YORK STATE'S REGLECT OF ITS RURAL RESIDENTS***



ForgottenFamilyMem  
ber\_RSA.pdf

## **RSA 2022-23 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES**

- 1. REFORMING THE STATE AID FUNDING FORMULA TO ACCURATELY ADJUST FOR POVERTY, SPARACITY AND OTHER COSTS:** If the state continue to simply fund current formula, our state's rural schools will continue to decline comparatively, due to the loss of enrollment. If rural school districts are to address the needs of their changing student population and avoid a downward economic spiral (lasting decades) the desperately needed new funding formula must adjust for increased poverty, increased numbers of English Language Learners, transient students and other challenges. In addition, restrictions on BOCES aid must be updated to accurately reflect current costs, given the vital role that BOCES plays in rural education. In particular, the decades old BOCES reimbursement rate for teachers must be increased to reflect current costs.
- 2. FOCUSING STATE ATTENTION ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE ISSUES:** Time and again, student mental health is identified as our society's most pressing challenge. It was true before the isolation and added stress of the pandemic and it is a glaring societal need now. Mental health issues and substance abuse are wreaking havoc on rural children and their ability to learn; often with tragic results. The increased pressures of joblessness (or underemployment) and transience are creating a "Grapes of Wrath"

like scenario for rural children and families. Increased mental health services are needed to help them cope with circumstances we find hard to envision. Lack of school funding has decimated mental health services to rural students. Guidance counselors, school psychologists and social workers are vital to a child's educational success and the future viability of rural New York State.

**3. DEVELOP STATE AND FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR RURAL BROADBAND**

**CAPACITY:** If the pandemic has proven anything, it is that access to broadband internet service is vital to both rural public education and expansion of the rural economy. When society must periodically rely on remote learning, rural students are incapable of receiving their constitutionally protected public education. Simply put, our students need broadband internet to compete with their peers from urban and suburban areas, rural businesses need it to exist (let alone compete) and thus employ those students. The absence of rural broadband is extremely detrimental to both students and our state's economy. Bringing broadband to rural areas has been delayed for far too long. Funding is available, programs are underway but have been fraught with bureaucratic wrangling and corporate failures. Yet, technological capabilities continue to expand and offer opportunities for rural schools and communities. RSA emphatically urges our state and federal governments to successfully implement this vital service as a public utility in the same way that our predecessors electrified and provided telephone service to rural areas.

**4. USE THE NEED FOR CHANGE RESULTING FROM THE ECONOMIC CRISIS TO IMPROVE THE DELIVERY OF RURAL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES AND PREVENT THE DECLINE OF RURAL INFLUENCE IN STATE POLICYMAKING.**

The 2020 census revealed a sharp decline in our state's rural population. This will quickly translate into decreased rural representation in governmental decision making. Rural areas already suffer from a lack of understanding on the part of officials of the differing impact of policies on rural schools. This stems from a lack of personal experience with the realities of rural life. Consequently, policies are proposed that simply don't work in rural areas; or worse, are unintentionally harmful to rural schools. As the state moves beyond the pandemic, it must avoid making changes that damage an already struggling rural education delivery system. As the pandemic and broadband internet service alter public education, New York State must counteract negative policy implications in the reimagining of

education and use our collective knowledge to propose and advance efficiencies and improvements in our rural educational delivery system.

**5. SUPPORTING REGIONALISM:** Today, more than ever, rural graduates struggle because their curriculum has been far too narrow to allow them to compete with their urban and suburban peers. Individual rural school districts simply don't have the finances to offer courses that other districts take for granted. As a result, rural graduates are denied economic and academic opportunities. School district mergers and consolidations have usually not been the answer. However, as rural schools continue to prove, regional collaboration and technological innovation are vital. Schools already share resources with other schools and BOCES, as well as localities. Regional high schools allow communities to retain their identity and expand curriculum. It's a model that has been remarkably successful in other states and on Long Island. New York's rural schools need legislative authority and financial incentives that will allow for a regional structure and which encourage further regional collaboration. State assistance for "tuitioning" of students to neighboring districts would provide needed curriculum expansion for kids. In addition, remote learning has proven itself effective enough to demand that rural curriculum be allowed to expand using advanced, remote learning strategies.

**6. TEACHER SHORTAGE: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF QUALIFIED EDUCATORS:** Rural schools are finding it extremely difficult to hire and keep certified educators. Our state's rural areas have experienced tremendous population loss. The lack of a sustainable rural economy and lack of affordable housing dissuades prospective teachers from working in rural communities and prevents rural school districts from paying competitive salaries. Yet, despite the fact that they can ill afford to compete with urban and suburban schools for staff, rural schools have no flexibility in state certification requirements. The state must offer additional assistance and certification flexibility if we are to address this dramatic shortage. For instance, housing or travel incentives would reduce teacher reluctance to work in rural areas. So too would allowing for greater flexibility in scheduling the school week, as has been done in many rural states. Most importantly, certification areas must be expanded to more easily recruit qualified educators in rural school districts.