

Testimony of the Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex (WSWHE) BOCES and its 31 Component School Districts Joint Budget Hearing on Lower Education

**Submitted by Andrew Cook, Superintendent of the Hartford Central School District
February 8, 2023**

Good afternoon, Chairpersons Krueger, Weinstein, Mayer, Benedetto, as well as other members of the Senate and Assembly. I am Andrew Cook, Superintendent of the Hartford Central School District and chair of the WSWHE Chief School Officers’ Advocacy Committee. I am here on behalf of the thirty-one (31) school district superintendents in the WSWHE Supervisory District and our BOCES District Superintendent, Dr Turina Parker.

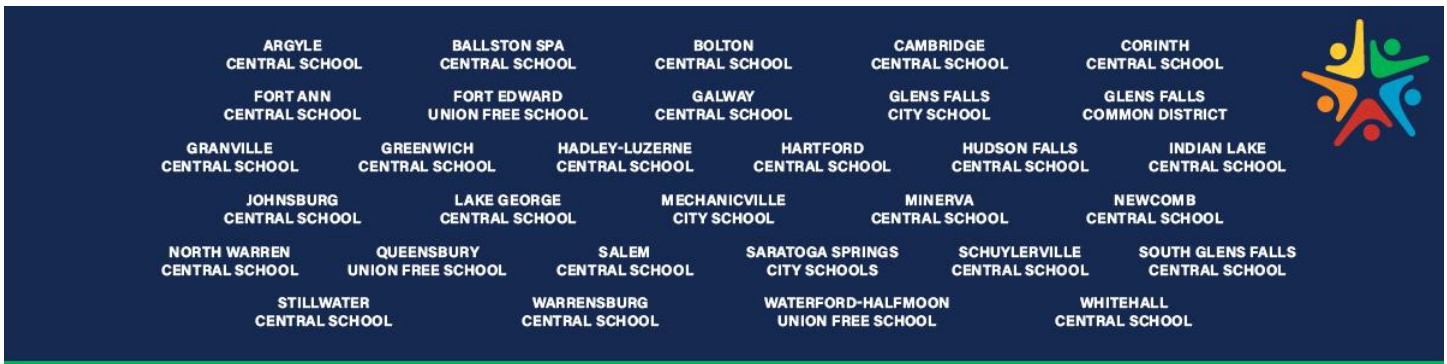
We are here today to provide some insights into how the Governor’s proposed 2023-24 Executive Budget would, if enacted, impact the 31 component districts that comprise the WSWHE BOCES, the staff who work at our schools, as well the 37,000 students who attend our schools.

We would again, like to extend to you and all members of the legislature, Senate and Assembly, our very sincere thanks for all you do to support our students, staff, and districts. Our districts, like many from around the state, are serving students facing increasing challenges. The number of students living in poverty, who are homeless, who are English language learners, and who have special education needs continues to increase each year across the region. Our faculty and staff are also facing increasing challenges, due to the growing workforce and pipeline shortages. Our districts are managing all of this amidst rising costs and high inflation.

As you begin your review of the Executive Budget proposal, we again ask for your support to ensure that our districts and through them, our students, have the supports they need in the 2023-24 school year.

Background:

As a point of background, the WSWHE BOCES serves 31 school districts in a five-county region. There are three city school districts, three union-free school districts, one common school district, and 24



central school districts. The total enrollment in the 31 component districts in Pre-K through grade 12 is approximately 37,000 students.

This is a critical time for all of the 31 school districts that comprise the WSWHE BOCES as they continue to ensure that our students are provided all the programs and opportunities they require to meet the needs of a 21st century economy.

At the same time, the 31 districts face constraints that are related, in part, to our districts' limitations on local revenue because of the tax cap, the significant and growing needs of our students, and increasing costs from escalating health and pension costs, among other factors.

We cannot underscore enough the significant needs of our students and the resources that our districts require in order to address these needs.

To illustrate:

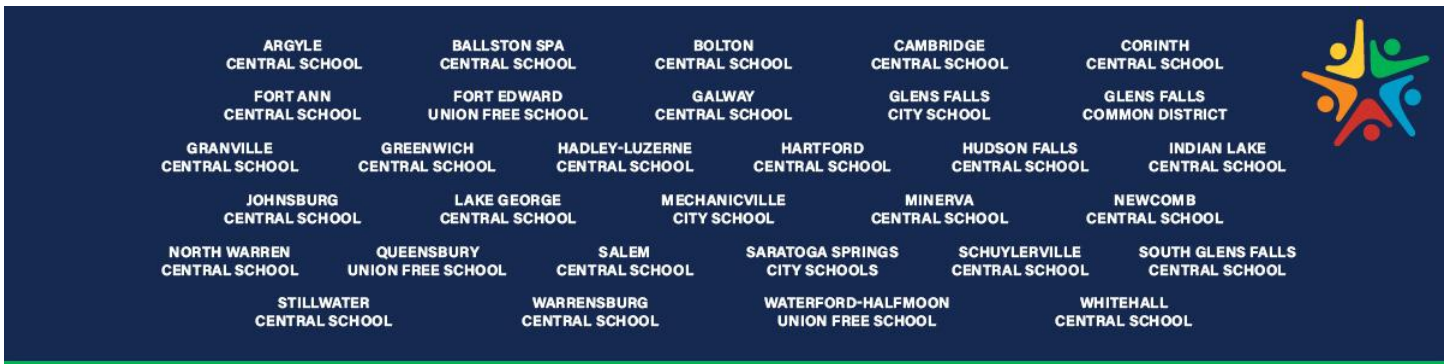
- Sixty-one percent (61%) of our districts have 1000 or fewer students, with the majority of these districts having less than 700 students.
- Although most of the districts are considered of “average” wealth, many have a high percentage of students with special needs: they are living in poverty, in foster care, or are homeless.
- In many of our districts, more than 50% of the students qualify for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program (FRLP), with some districts having significantly higher eligibility rates.
- Several districts have a high combined-wealth ratio (CWR) due to the presence of expensive lakefront property located within their district boundaries despite the number of residents who are full-time residents of low-income.

It is for these and other reasons, we urge the Legislature to consider the following recommendations:

2023-2024 School Aid

Districts around the state, including those in the WSWHE BOCES region are appreciative of the multi-year efforts to fully and finally implement the Foundation Aid Formula. We greatly appreciate that the school aid packages in the last two years have included a due minimum increase for all districts as well as the full funding of expense-based aids.

While many districts in our region have experienced enrollment loss, that does not necessarily equate cost savings. Districts of all sizes continue to have fixed cost drivers (such as step and lane increases, benefits and pensions) as well as cyclical cost fluctuations (like fuel). Moreover, the needs of the students we are serving continue to be more complex. To ensure that all students are supported, we ask that the following provisions be included in the enacted budget:



- The final phase in payment of Foundation Aid for those districts that are not yet fully funded, inclusive of the inflationary increase proposed by the Executive.
- At least the 3% due minimum increase proposed by the Executive for all districts, regardless of Foundation Aid phase-in level.
- A “save-harmless” provision to ensure a stable funding baseline for all districts.
- Full fund expense-based aids.

We request that these provisions be included in the 2023-24 school aid package.

Increase State Support for Career and Technical Education

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs provide students with essential skills that prepare them for college and careers. However, the existing BOCES aid formula for CTE programs operated by BOCES only allows districts to receive aid on the first \$30,000 of a BOCES instructor’s salary. The average salary of a CTE teacher is now at least \$65,000 and must be increased to ensure that students have access to the CTE pathway by increasing the amount of CTE teacher salary that is aidable.

We request that the aidable salary for BOCES CTE teachers be increased starting in the 2023-24 school year.

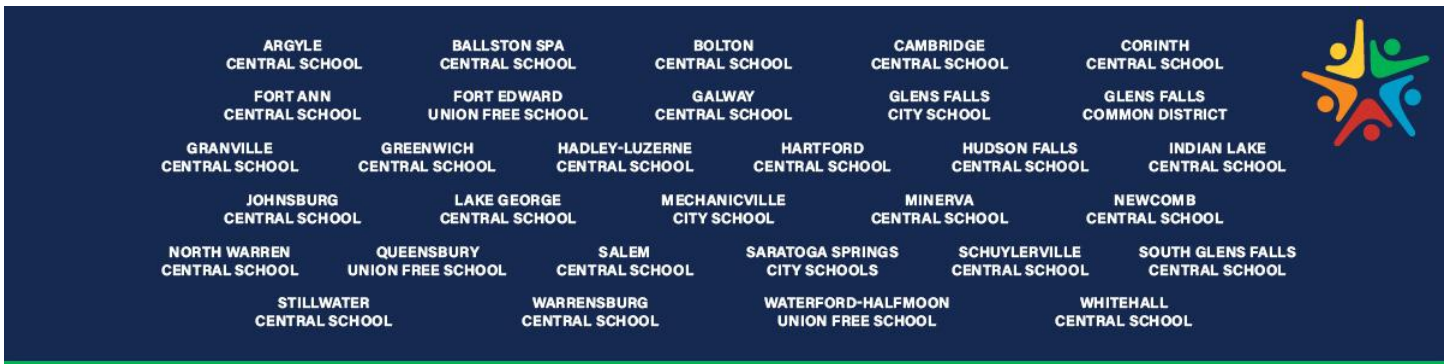
Support Universal Free Meals for Students

For the last 2 years, schools have been able to offer free breakfast and lunch for their students and received reimbursement at the free-lunch rate for all meals served. This practice, adopted as part of the federal government’s reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted a pre-pandemic reality; that students will learn more effectively when they are not hungry. In addition, more students who need school meals will take advantage of them when their peers are also accessing them. Rather than returning to the pre-COVID-19 practice of having some families pay in full or in part for school meals, maintaining the availability of universal meals at no cost to families should be maintained.

We request that the enacted state budget make funds available to maintain a universal school meal program.

Workforce Development

School districts are facing extreme workforce challenges. Teacher, bus driver and other staff shortages are making it increasingly difficult to fully and properly staff buildings. To address this growing problem, the state should consider programs that would help address these shortages. Providing increased flexibility in teacher certifications would allow districts to more effectively utilize those teachers that they are able to hire. Adjustments to Tier 6 of the retirement system may help districts retain staff by making



longevity more valuable. In the short term, extending the authority of school districts to employee retirees without pension penalty or a 211 waiver, as proposed by the Executive, would allow districts to continue to use willing retirees to fill gaps while the employee pipeline is strengthened.

We request that policymakers consider increasing flexibilities in teacher certification requirements and retiree employment as well as Tier 6 reform.

Zero-Emission Busses

School districts around the state recognize the importance of taking steps to reduce emissions and protect the environment for the students of the future. Legislation adopted as a part of last year’s state budget set very immediate goals for the transition to the purchase and utilization of these buses, which may be less readily available than traditional diesel buses. As districts begin the process of transitioning to the new buses as required by this law, we ask that state officials engage in ongoing monitoring of implementation. The Executive budget proposes annual reporting on this transition that may help define the barriers to the implementation on the existing timeline. However, we would want to be cautious in ensuring that this data is collected and used to inform future decisions and adjustments, not merely collected.

We request that the state engage in ongoing monitoring of implementation of zero-emission busses and adjust as needed.

Ongoing Capital Projects

Current law allows school districts to make one “capital outlay” annually. Under this provision each district may conduct one project that has a cost of \$100,000 or less and is paid for in cash each year. Because these projects do not require voter approval or borrowing, they can be completed more efficiently. Districts then receive their total building aid on the full project in the next year. The current threshold limit of \$100,000 was established in 2002 and has not increased since and the relative buying power has decreased significantly.

We request that the threshold be increased from \$100,000 to \$250,000 as a part of the 2023-24 enacted budget.