

THE HARD WORK OF STAYING



NEW YORK'S RURAL SCHOOLS IN A TIME OF CHANGE

THE CROSSROAD

Having endured and stabilized in the aftermath of rural New York's massive outward migration during the Great Recession and the severe isolation brought on by the pandemic, rural schools and their host communities stand at a crossroad; a juncture of tremendous opportunity and survival of their way of life.

As businesses closed or exited, rural communities and families were uprooted as they followed employment opportunities (and as rural communities fought the pandemic without benefit of connectivity or resources) those who remained accepted increased civic and financial burdens. There are simply fewer people to share the responsibilities of keeping rural communities going and each remaining resident has assumed a greater share of the work needed to carry on. Simply put, New York State's rural residents are doing the hard work of staying.

Yet, despite New York's historic challenges of high costs, taxes and debt level, robust bureaucracy and the lack of a focused economic development plan for rural areas, there is a hopeful attitude, insightful and creative approaches to issues, the determination to build on the advantages of rural life and most importantly, to provide the quality of life and opportunities for children that every parent desires. To succeed, rural residents have not only accepted greater individual and collective responsibility, but they have challenged their traditional practices in order to support those opportunities.

While **neighbors helping neighbors** has always been a pillar of rural life, the sharing of resources between communities and schools is a newfound and necessary approach. Though often uncomfortable and undertaken with the recognition of financial need, they have nonetheless explored and carried out a system wide exploration of the sharing of programs, services and a more regional approach to education.

While other states provide an increased percentage of funding for public education, New York State relies on local funding approaching two thirds of the total. This has long created tremendous disparity in educational opportunities between rural, urban and suburban communities of varying ability to contribute to local schools.



Further, traditional federal funding streams are currently in flux and have been proven to be highly unpredictable to date. The combination of these factors places rural schools in jeopardy of losing educational elements that allow their students to compete academically and in career advancement with peers from communities of greater means.

The other fork of the road, however, provides great promise of a new approach with the potential to usher in not only new prosperity for rural communities, but for all of New York State. New York is building a new public educational structure that is less reliant on traditional testing and more focused on the strengths of students and the broader array of ways they evidence success.

Operationalizing this new approach has made New York the educational envy of the nation and offers the promise of providing the business community with the one thing they have clamored for: a workforce capable of communicating, collaborating across cultures, problem solving, able to adapt to a dynamic environment and possessing a sound work ethic. If successful, New York may well become the one state where business can thrive, despite historic impediments.

The question for leaders is whether the state can pivot to this new, potentially game changing educational approach while funding education based on outmoded and largely irrelevant factors. Can the state fund the “new” while clinging to the old? Not likely. This generation of New York State’s learners face challenges unlike any other.

The combination of fear stemming from the proliferation of mass school shootings and the “solitary confinement” of the pandemic has created learning, developmental and emotional deficits never experienced by prior generations. No longer can the state afford to fund schools according to how many students are in the seats. Rather, it must fund them according to what those remaining students need.



There is no shortage of guidance in making the transition. Other states provide a base level of funding for every child, according to an assessment of instructional, emotional and mental health needs. Other states recognize the challenges imposed on small and rural school districts and the limitations of economies of scale by creating a separate funding category for “small but essential schools.”

Simply put, it is the state’s constitutional responsibility to provide a sound, basic education to every child irrespective of their location or demographic designation. If it chooses to do so through a system of schools as currently configured, it must adequately and equitably fund those schools.

The disparity of educational opportunities currently allowed by the state is an abomination recognized across the nation, as New York has been singled out as having the worst educational funding distribution system in America; for several decades.

The Rockefeller Institute was commissioned by the governor and state legislature to create guidance leading to a successful funding model. To date the state has accepted fewer than five of that report’s over 30 recommendations. [<https://rockinst.org/foundation-aid-study>] The pathway is clear and the goal is unassailably beneficial. New York State’s rural school districts can lead the way, serving as an example of successful implementation at this ground-breaking crossroad of history, but if (and only if) its unique challenges are addressed.

THE STUDY

The Rural Schools Association of New York State has carried out a series of 13 Regional Rural Issues Forums across the entirety of the state.

Additionally, a forum of rural school leaders was convened in New York City. Every region of the state was afforded the opportunity to provide information on the hopes and dreams for its children, the values of its unique circumstances, history and traditions, as well as the issues and challenges impeding progress toward success.

These regional meetings gathered not only school officials, but also community leaders, business members, state and federal legislative representatives, higher learning instructors and administrators, parents of students, taxpayers, as well as local and regional service providers, utilities and economic development leaders.



Further, Thought Exchange (an electronic public participation platform) was provided to engage persons unable to participate in the “in person” events. Approximately 400 individuals from throughout the state participated electronically, where they were able not only to offer their own perspective, but rate the comments offered by others. Public comment has been analyzed and categorized here into the challenges and priorities most expressed during the public engagement process.

Due to the vast geographic expanse of rural New York and the sparsity of its population, it is often easy to ignore that New York State is home to one of the largest rural population in America. One third of all public education students in the state and nearly one half of its school districts are rural.

This report is an attempt to provide leaders (who are almost always without a personal rural perspective or experience) a concise and powerful indication of what rural New York needs and what it can offer in the state’s attempt to reclaim a legitimate title of being The Empire State.

HOPES AND DREAMS

The overarching theme of comments at the Regional Rural Issues Forums and electronic Thought Exchange was that life in New York State’s rural communities has tremendous value and is cherished by those who have chosen and know it. They have made sacrifices to continue it, recognize the possibility of losing its viability and are eager and energetic in their desire to build it into its full promise for the next generation of rural New Yorkers.



They have expanded on their value of helpfulness to neighbors by sharing their excellent programs and services with nearby school districts that are unable to individually provide them. They have combined sports teams, joined together for school musicals and other programming opportunities otherwise unavailable. They attempt to maximize those often few partners in close proximity, such as BOCES, SUNY and community college systems, county agencies and regional partners like chambers of commerce, civic organizations and youth programs.

Rural schools (to the extent often diminished finances allow) partner with local business in job shadowing and internship opportunities, as well as coordinating with higher education to create a school to work pipeline, in their hope of allowing a new generation of New Yorkers to live, work and succeed in rural communities.

They aspire to provide the foundation necessary for young people to both desire and have the ability to either stay or return to their homes to live and raise their families; this after a generation of New York State losing its young people after graduation as a result of high costs, high taxes and fewer employment opportunities. They are attempting to “grow their own” required workforce, understanding that traditional employment has often declined and barriers to coming home are significant. They remain fiercely loyal to their communities and are increasingly engaged in efforts to support them through creativity, innovation, new alliances and partnerships.

CHALLENGES

What rural schools and their host communities lack is attention from the state. There remains no comprehensive state economic development plan for rural areas of the state. State funding of schools fails in accounting for the ability of rural schools to operate under rules designed for districts with large enrollments, greater adaptability and larger tax bases in mind. Across the board approaches to governance frequently ignore the unique impact of laws, regulations and funding distribution on small, inadequately resourced schools and communities, creating impossible choices in prioritizing between equally crucial elements of a child’s needs.

For instance, with school shootings regularly slaughtering schoolchildren and local law enforcement often too far distant in rural areas, should a school district really be forced to choose between a School Resource Officer and a vital educational program when weighing inadequate state aid funding? Should a school district have to select whether to transport a child in an environmentally friendly zero emission vehicle or to provide an adequate education once she gets to school?

The following is a listing of the top challenges facing rural schools and their communities.

Notice: Our priorities often aren't directly about educating the child well, they're about creating conditions that allow for it to happen at all!



#7: Economic Hardship

Lack of employment in rural New York and the nature of migratory agricultural employment has led to increased poverty. The mass exodus out of rural areas of our state destabilized families who remain, leaving many children isolated, vulnerable and unready to learn when they start school. Children are coming to school with greater needs, less prepared and with fewer supports within their homes, families and communities.

Many rural counties lack service providers and arrival at the school steps becomes the first public response to a child's challenges. There are instances of counties denying services and shifting costs to schools. When students arrive, they come with language and socialization deficits.

The ability of rural schools to host high quality pre-school programs is hampered by the state's approach to pupil transportation and by its demand that local school districts pay for the first year of operation and then await partial reimbursement by the state. Our rural schools simply don't have the funds to "front" the state's goal of "universal pre-k." Possible methods of addressing the situation are to authorize and support virtual mental health services, prevent counties from "off loading" pre school services onto schools and to support "grow your own" programs for service providers in rural areas. Inadequate access to health care can be greatly diminished by supporting school based healthcare, which vastly improves access and decreases lost time from both learning and parental work.

#6: School Safety

Funding constraints and inequities have often forced rural school districts to choose between student safety and effective educational programming. The distance and slower police response times in rural communities require the on site presence of a School Resource Officer. That officer is often the highest paid employee in the district, as law enforcement agencies offer their services only at a premium price. SROs are not only a preventative presence, but the only timely and effective response in a school shooting situation.

The fact is, society has no business requiring children to attend school if they cannot be kept safe there. There are a number of routes to the solution, including removing funding for School Resource Officers from Foundation Aid and taken out of competition with required educational programs and services and at a level that allows every school district to have at least one officer.

Other options to explore might be allowing these services to become eligible for BOCES aid or simply providing an adequate and equitable level of Foundation Aid that eliminates competition between educational programming and the safety of children. In addition, cyber security for schools is a burgeoning issue, as schools and the safety of a child's personal information have become targets.

Our system of education requires the use of electronic data and as such, the state has an obligation to help fiscally challenged school districts maintain that data and protect the safety of our children.



#5: Special Education Needs

The special educational needs of rural children have intensified dramatically in the wake of the exodus and the pandemic. Identification of special needs in children entering school this year has been marked as high as 50%.

Emotional and behavioral challenges, combined with the inability of schools to employ specialized staff is leading to costly "out of district" placements of these federal and state mandated services. The result is that the education of every student in the district suffers for lack of sufficient finances.

Further, the state has extended the time required of schools to provide special ed services to the age of 22, which is morally and educationally appropriate but an astronomical and unaccounted for fiscal challenge. Quality of life challenges in rural areas have exacerbated student need, so far without a response from the state or federal governments. School district and regional programs are at or over capacity, with long wait lists.

High need students require therapeutic and behavioral programming that rural districts cannot sustain alone. When these students enter a district, additional funds are not provided. Local budgets are set and these additional costs directly infringe on the ability to provide existing educational programs. With the limited fiscal parameters of small, rural districts, these costs can be disruptive and educationally devastating.

#4: Mandates

New York State's legislative and regulatory processes vigorously address recognized needs. New laws and regulations are imposed each year. Sadly, there is rarely if ever any thought given to the cumulative impact of years of these state mandates. Seldom do state leaders repeal laws or regulations when new ones are added. After generations of this approach, public education in our state has become a labyrinth of disparate layers of competing rules. Reporting and procedural requirements place severe financial and time constraints on fiscally struggling rural schools, where staff frequently perform multiple functions in order to operate.

Rules in our state are increasingly promulgated by leaders hailing from high population communities. They simply don't understand or even recognize how their approach might not work in areas with few independent financial and human resources. New Laws and regulations need to include broad discretion in their implementation.

Simply put, just state the requirement and leave the “how to” to those at the local level who know their community and their schools best. Rural residents are masterful at accomplishing a great deal with little to work with. They are creative, dedicated and able to implement highly successful programs if given the latitude to work within their limitations. The state needs to create a rural advisory board to provide information.

Perhaps the most egregious mandate has been that of converting to zero emission buses, where compliance is a direct threat to the ability to operate our rural school districts at all. Many rural districts don’t raise half of the cost of one bus under the tax cap, let alone pay other inflationary costs during that year.

Public utilities have made it clear that they are unable to provide the necessary power without huge cost increases and many years of infrastructure construction. They cite that charging 25 school buses is the equivalent of powering a Super Walmart and 100 buses is equal to a large shopping mall. They charge the grid at night when buses would be charged and at that time they prioritize hospitals and other public essentials. Utilities indicate that power transfer to schools requires a multi-million dollar expenditure before factoring in the cost of buses or charging stations and that in many areas, they simply cannot provide the power at present.



#3: Staffing Shortages

Rural schools can’t get teachers, bus drivers, administrators or other staff; pure and simple. They haven’t been provided sufficient resources to compete with salaries offered by suburban schools, distances to commute are too far when local housing is either unavailable (in needier communities) or unaffordable (in the many rural recreational areas of our state, e.g. the Finger Lakes, Thousand Islands, Long Island and parts of the Catskills and Adirondacks) and so even those who come initially often leave for more lucrative opportunities once they’ve gained experience.

Our state needs to incentivize people to work in our rural schools by providing student loan forgiveness, low cost housing, salary supplementation and flexibility in certification. Narrow certification rules, the lack of reciprocity with neighboring states (despite the fact that many outperform New York) and the fact that educators in New York are required to obtain a master’s degree soon after hiring have created severe shortages of teachers, particularly in specialized areas of instruction.

The problem doesn’t stop in the classroom however, as non-instructional staff is just as hard to find. Bus Drivers, custodians and others are no longer attracted to work within schools as the retirement system has minimized its allure and jobs in the private sector are plentiful.

To make matters worse, the cost of family health insurance for employees is now literally greater than the actual salary in many instances. New York State needs to expand certification areas, increase reciprocity and offer its own version of the federal Commercial Drivers License (CDL) that recognizes the lack of need for a local school bus driver to have the skills of a mechanic. New York’s State Education Department is endeavoring to address these challenges and those changes must receive legislative financial support.

#2: Student Mental Health

Isolation. Increased Poverty. Distance to providers (requiring time away from work) Opioid and alcohol abuse. Transience and Family Disruption. Fear for personal safety at school. Sadly this is a snapshot of many areas in rural New York; a picture of community increasingly in need of mental health services. Students (children) in particular have been affected by the pandemic. Trauma has played an increasing role in their development, expectations upon return to traditional classroom learning have created stress and their family life is strained. The result? A drastic increase in the need for student mental health services.

Schools have always been a key component of addressing the mental health of children and the state's Community Schools model creates a good structure to expand services for the mental health of children and their families. But models used in areas of high population density don't work in rural communities. Delivery systems that make use of private providers aren't available in rural areas, distance makes getting help burdensome and time consuming.

Fortunately, prior state help with building needs and the decline in enrollment have freed up school space. Our state needs to utilize school based health centers to meet the healthcare needs (including mental healthcare needs) of its rural communities. Providing online services when distance in rural areas makes physical presence nonviable for providers and when needs are immediate must be authorized and supported.

Without question, the top challenge facing New York's rural schools is --

#1: Lack of Proper Funding

Increased poverty and the associated needs of children have not been recognized, despite "fully funding" a formula that is two decades old. Funding schools as if they had not experienced the enrollment decline, poverty increases, increased mental and physical health needs, increased transience, lower local tax base, increases in English language learners, school safety issues and a host of other recent changes is ignoring a rural educational crisis.

Recent federal aid upheaval exacerbates the situation. The state school aid funding formula must be adjusted to account for these changes and provide the resources needed for rural schools to provide the sound, basic education ensured by our state's constitution. There is no longer an issue whether the state must either fully fund or fix the funding formula. The shortcomings of the current formula are glaringly apparent.

While many of our wealthiest schools see increases well into the double digits, rural schools experience a minimal across the board increase after years of frozen funding, a local tax cap lower than 2 percent and a diminished local tax base. Year after year our state aid distribution system is annually ranked as the worst in the nation. Wealthier Save Harmless districts see large increases in funding from what their data would generate, while financially struggling rural districts still on the formula see only minimal, inflationary increases. The inequity is alarming. Now that we're fully funding our formula, shouldn't we do it in a way that addresses the needs of today's children rather than those of a generation ago? Our state cannot fund both the future and the past. The pathway to a brighter future for New York is before us.

Funding according to needs of the past prevents us from reaching it. When well more than half of your school districts are no longer receiving aid according to the formula, you no longer have a credible formula: Only the ability to add or subtract from irrelevant numbers and outdated factors. State leaders asked and received the Rockefeller Institute's recommendations for school aid funding. Now, it needs to have the fortitude to implement it with an eye toward present and future student need, rather than student enrollment.

**The phrase "The hard work of staying" was first coined by 2018 National Rural Teacher of the Year Wade Owlett.*

**For a comprehensive listing of rural challenges and issues identified at the
Regional Rural Issues Forums, please visit www.RSANY.org.**

Your Support Empowers Our Commitment to Rural Students, Educators, and Communities.

