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STATE OF THE STATE SHIFTS PRIORITIES AWAY FROM PUBLIC SCHOOLS

RSA was invited to attend the Albany version of this year's State of the State Address; where attendees were provided a list of past accomplishments, as well as plans to expand on them in the coming year. Governor Cuomo's presentation centered around economic development, infrastructure development, tax relief and social justice and governmental ethics issues. There was little, if any mention of public education. While many of the State of the State proposals had dollar figures attached, the actual Executive Budget proposal isn't constitutionally due until next week. There has been some speculation that the governor will issue his budget plan as early as this Friday.

The following is a compilation of State of the State proposals that at least tangentially affect rural New York and its schools. This list was compiled from an original listing prepared by The Vandervort Group, LLC. **Material in parenthesis is reaction by RSA.**

– Tuition Free College for New York's Middle Class

New York's tuition-free degree program, the Excelsior Scholarship, is the first of its kind in the nation and will enable thousands of bright, young students to realize their dream of higher education. (While altruistic in its attempt to curb college costs for middle class families, the plan is dra-



RSA Executive Director attended Governor Cuomo's State of the State Address in Albany. The crowd was enthusiastic, but public educational programs were nowhere to be found.



Governor Andrew Cuomo highlights upstate economic development initiatives in the last of his regional State of the State Addresses.

matically underfunded and ignores several important factors. First, community colleges and SUNY and CUNY schools have an extremely high drop out rate; some as high as three out of every four students, making subsidizing tuition a high cost/low benefit expenditure. Research shows that pre school is a better use of state funds, addressing a serious cognitive deficit in many students. Finally, the governor appears fond of throwing moderate amounts of state funding at new ideas, while the state continues to disregard its constitutional obligation to provide a public education to every student.)

- Making Child Care More Affordable for Middle Class Families

This builds on Governor Cuomo's Nation-Leading efforts to expand opportunity for middle class New Yorkers.

(Child care is an economic development tool designed to allow parents to work. Pre school is a means of making children ready to learn and addressing language and learning deficits in the home. Caring for children is fine, but while you've got them, it'd be nice if the state's plan were to get them ready to learn.)

– **Expand After School Education to Children in High-Need Areas across the State**

\$35 million in funding will create 22,000 new after-school slots to close the opportunity gap for students in the 16 Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative Areas. (This is a superb proposal, provided you happen to live in one of the designated areas. Our state's rural areas are every bit as much in need of this vital assistance for encouraging student success.)

– **Invest \$2 Billion in Clean Water Infrastructure and Water Quality Protection**

An investment to help communities upgrade aging drinking water and wastewater infrastructure, funding to protect drinking water sources by conserving open space and addressing contaminants, prioritize regional collaboration and watershed level solutions. (This is a response to the dual issues of industrially contaminated groundwater found last year in several communities and lead found in school drinking water. Many local communities have ancient water systems and this would be an appropriate and timely expenditure. The state's history though, is to begin these types of programs with great fanfare and then to underfund the need, leaving many communities with an unanticipated deficit. We should await further information on this program.)

– **Complete the Empire State Trail by 2020**

Build 350 new miles of trail that will connect Lake Erie to the Capital Region and New York Harbor to Canada. (This is a nearly two hundred million dollar, three year initiative to spur upstate tourism. Much of the trail system is already in place, with the plan set to link them together, along with amenities for hikers, bikers and joggers. No motorized vehicles will be allowed. Given the many historic and recreational attractions along the existing and planned trail, this plan could bring new revenue to many older communities.)

– **Extend the Empire State Excellence in Teaching Awards**

An extended program to honor additional 60 teachers. Honorees receive \$5,000 stipend for professional development. (Having done a great deal to bring the status of the teaching profession into question, this plan will expand on the governor's more recent attempts to highlight the best in teaching and provide funding to make the best, better. It's a good program and will be better when expanded. The issue of course is that all staff needs professional development to improve educational practice in our schools.)

– **Empower Voters to Reduce Property Taxes and Costs of Local Government**

Builds on Governor's previous actions to reduce the burden of local property taxes, including the property tax cap. (This plan induced an outcry from local municipal officials that will be asked to have the public suggest ways to consolidate, merge or share local government services. Cornell research indicates that New York State is already the epicenter of shared governmental services worldwide. It is similar to the plan proposed a few years back for school districts within regions. The difference with this proposal is that the public will have the opportunity to vote; something foreign to our counterparts in municipal government, but all too familiar to school officials.)

– **Sweeping, Comprehensive Actions to Combat the Heroin and Opioid Epidemic in New York State**

Recruit Health Care providers to become prescribers. Establish 24/7 Crisis treatment centers. Create New

York's first recovery High Schools. Require emergency department prescribers to consult the prescription monitoring program registry to combat "Doctor Shopping". (While many might say that any efforts to fight this menace are good efforts, we will need specifics on how "Recovery High Schools" would be structured and funded. Some might say that adequately funding afterschool, weekend, digital learning and other educational efforts would be the best means of preventing opioid abuse from the outset.)

In total, your RSA's reaction to this year's State of the State Address is that public education was ignored, perhaps portending an Executive Budget that does not advance our schools. This would be consistent with historic trends of educational spending that usually reflect "down" years of state aid when governors are in the middle years of their election cycle and exacerbated when it is an "off election year" for state legislators, like this one. Having heeded the outcry to eliminate the GEA, the state may be poised to address priorities that were put on hold until that effort was completed. Your Rural Schools Association will provide you with an analysis of the Executive Budget proposal as soon as it is released.



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