

NEW YORK'S RURAL SCHOOLS THE FORGOTTEN CRISIS

Rural Schools Association of New York State
2018 Legislative Priorities



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Association
of New York State

NEW YORK'S RURAL SCHOOLS: THE FORGOTTEN CRISIS

When state leaders look to address the worst conditions in New York State's schools, they rarely think of rural schools. With comparatively high graduation rates, leaders quickly turn to urban schools (where the graduation rates are historically lower.) With fewer residents and lacking the political clout to demand attention, our rural schools are withering from benign neglect. Even a cursory inspection reveals a broad and deep crisis. For instance:



- The state claims to support “Universal Pre-K”, an established means of combatting the early learning deficiencies resulting from poverty and transience. Yet, their requirement that local school districts use their local funds to start the program and wait for state reimbursement has prevented many rural schools from participating. Similarly, lack of adequate state funding of pre-school transportation keeps most rural students from participating.
- New York State doesn't have a pronounced teacher shortage, but its rural schools do. As rural population dwindles and rural school budgets tighten, our rural schools can no longer compete for qualified teachers in science, technology, engineering, the arts and math; the subjects most vital to many students' success.
- Despite their high graduation rates, many rural schools can't afford to provide a broad enough curriculum to make their graduates competitive in either college or the workplace. Good rural students find themselves unable to keep up academically because they have no context in which to put college level information.
- Despite urban New York State either increasing in population or holding steady, the state in total has lost nearly 175,000 in population each year for the past several years. How is this possible? They are leaving our rural communities in droves. The Great Recession took away local employment. There are no jobs for rural students to return home to and no apparent state strategy for rural economic development. A recent study by NYSASBO reported that well over half of rural parents are counseling their children to seek their futures outside of their home communities.
- Increased poverty, the opioid epidemic, increased numbers of English Language Learners and decreasing enrollment have dramatically changed New York's rural landscape. Just 40 years ago, New York's rural economy was strong enough to bail out New York City from “bankruptcy.” Now it needs our help and that help must start with our schools by:



1 REFORMING THE STATE AID FUNDING FORMULA TO ACCURATELY ADJUST FOR POVERTY, OTHER COSTS:

If the state simply updates the current formula, rural schools will lose out, due to the loss of enrollment. The desperately needed new funding formula must adjust for increased poverty, increased numbers of English Language Learners, transient students and other challenges, if rural school districts are to address the needs of its changing student population and avoid a downward economic spiral lasting decades.

2 IMPROVING THE LOCAL PROPERTY TAX LEVY CAP:

The state senate has urged making the cap on local property tax levies permanent. If that's the case, then we must remove inequities in the current cap. For instance, no school district should ever face a negative tax cap and the cap should actually be a 2% cap (as advertised) and not the negligible increase that the consumer inflation rate has allowed in recent years. Rural school districts don't raise enough under the current structure to provide for their students.

3 DEVELOPING FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR RURAL COMMUNITY SCHOOLS:

The Community Schools model takes advantage of the available space created by Excel Aid funding and the loss of student enrollment. School space would be used to provide afterschool, weekend and summer programming. Other uses might include mental, physical health care, dental or vision programs for either students or the community. Rural schools have two primary assets: Caring people and space. The Community Schools Model makes use of these assets to provide a better future for rural children and their families.

4 PRESERVING FEDERAL FUNDING PROGRAMS AND TAX EXEMPTIONS:

Proposals by the federal administration have urged the cutting of education funding, as well as the elimination of state and local tax deductions for federal income tax purposes. Either would be extremely harmful to rural schools. The loss of property tax deductions in rural areas with large tracts of land would be devastating to the rural economy. The loss of federal funding for educational programs would be disruptive and place an increased burden on state and local taxpayers.

5 SUPPORTING ADDITIONAL PRE-K, INCLUDING TRANSPORTATION AID AND "UP FRONT" FUNDING:

While the state claims to support "Universal Pre-K", in fact, it is far from universally provided. Rural school districts have a difficult time securing the funds necessary to begin these programs. Currently, they must "front" the money and await state reimbursement in the following year. This keeps many districts from providing this vital service. Others are unable to operate the program as a result of the lack of state aid for transportation (which is essential for rural parents.)

6 FOCUSING STATE ATTENTION ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE ISSUES:

The annual NYSCOSS survey of superintendents identified student mental health as their most pressing issue. Mental health issues and substance abuse are wreaking havoc on rural school funding and rural student learning; often with tragic results. The increased pressures of joblessness, or underemployment and transience in search of work are creating a "Grapes of Wrath" like scenario for rural children. Increased mental health services are needed to help them cope with circumstances we find hard to envision.

7 IMPROVING STATE SUPPORT FOR RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

Unlike New York's cities and suburbs, our rural areas remain in the throes of economic decline. We have lost jobs and population in record numbers. At present there does not appear to be a comprehensive state plan to address this crisis. Without a significant state investment in rural economic development, we cannot adequately support our rural schools and rural students have no opportunity to remain in their home communities upon graduation, leading to an economic desert that will pose a dramatic burden on our state.

8 OPPOSING VIRTUAL CHARTER SCHOOLS:

While digital learning offers tremendous opportunities for rural education, New York State's charter school law would make the prospect of a virtual charter school incredibly damaging to our already challenged public schools. Homeschooled students would become an economic drain and more students would be deprived of the social experience that is the backbone of the rural community (leading to increased isolation and further mental health issues.) New York State must advance digital learning through its public schools, while rejecting the proven failure of virtual charter schools as an educational delivery system.



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