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THE EXECUTIVE BUDGET PLAN

THE BARRAGE HAS ENDED...

BUT NOT THE SIEGE

There are no onerous new proposals hanging over the head of public education in this year's Executive Budget. There is no threat of the loss of state aid for noncompliance with those proposals. There are state aid runs for all to see embedded within the language. There is more transparency and less stridency. There are good proposals and bad, but they stand on their own for all to see. The plan is presented without rancor or rhetoric and it sets an appropriate structure in which the legislature can analyze and prioritize programs and policies. In short, it does what good Executive Budgets are supposed to do; set a direction for the state, show state leaders what the governor wants and how much that would cost. The plan comes in on time and with sufficient information to allow the legislature to deliberate and produce a state budget on time. That's all good news for rural schools and a dramatic improvement over the approach taken in the past. **In other words, with this budget, the trains run on time.**

The problem is, for our rural schools, the train is empty. While we appreciate the end (or at least a break) to the criticism leveled at public education and while we greatly appreciate the ability to use state aid projections to begin the district budgeting process, it is extremely difficult not to be discouraged at what the governor has in store for our schools.

Did he not hear what the Board of Regents, the Educational Conference Board and RSA all said about the amount needed to sustain our schools? We are not facing an economic crisis this year. We are facing a legislated crisis. The "tax cap" is the governor's signature law. He is proud of the impact he claims it has had in stemming the rise in local property taxes. He went a step beyond any other state in not only capping the local levy, but in linking it to the rate of consumer inflation. Other states (even those that are capped) won't face the impact of that arbitrary restriction this year. **For all practical purposes, we don't have a tax cap this year; we have a local property tax freeze.**

In preparing the Executive Budget, Governor Cuomo knew that. The roughly \$800 million raised by local taxpayers for their schools last year would not be available this year; by design. So despite the fact that the state's economy is growing and despite the fact that it still has an unprecedented \$2.3 billion on hand from the banking settlement, our schools are facing yet another funding crisis. This wouldn't be problematic, provided the state recognizes its obligation to make up the difference and properly fund its schools. But when has the state ever recognized its

obligation to properly fund its schools? Even as you read this, a state court is deliberating whether to (once again) order the state to make good on its constitutional obligation to fund our schools in a way that upholds the rights of our state's children. This year the Regents pegged that number well north of \$2 billion.

So did the Educational Conference Board (which is made up of the state's largest public education organizations.) So did your Rural Schools Association, saying that it would take more than \$2 billion to merely "roll over" the existing programs and services currently in place. Anything less and our schools will once again face the kind of cuts experienced during the Great Recession. An education is sequential. It steadily builds on itself from year to year. You can't have a funding stream from year to year that looks like an EKG chart. It disrupts the educational process.

Yet, the governor has proposed less than half of what it will take to simply move forward with what we have. No improvements, nothing new, just holding on to what we do now. Not progressing while the world progresses around you is bad enough. To start cutting again when sister states are building would make it harder for our students to compete and to build the kind of New York State economy that the governor promotes.

How bad is it? Well, while the plan reimburses districts the full amount of BOCES, Transportation, Special Ed and Building Aid (rightfully so, since this is money the districts have already spent, based on the state's promise of reimbursement) it provides less than half of what is needed to end the dreaded Gap Elimination Adjustment. (Tell us again why our schools have a Gap Elimination Adjustment forced on them when the state hasn't had a budget gap in several years now? Can the state only balance its budget if it continues to starve its schools of court ordered funding?) It provides only an increase of \$266 million in Foundation Aid when it owes our schools billions. In total, it proposes an increase of \$991 million; one third of what its own educational leaders say we need.

There are some sound proposals contained within the plan. And a state aid increase under normal circumstances would be nothing to scoff at. For instance, it provides \$100 million for Community Schools. Community Schools are phenomenal ideas and may someday be the salvation of rural education. But the governor gives three fourths of the money to persistently struggling urban schools. They need it-desperately, since they only have a couple years to turn things around and their chronic failure is our disgrace. As we know though, our rural schools have many of the same problems experienced by our urban neighbors; teenage drug use, high rates of teen pregnancy and other issues associated with unsupervised youth outside of school. We need a dramatic investment in this program, across all demographic areas experiencing these problems and now would be the time, not later when the rural loss of enrollment is further compounded by the cost of addressing severe social issues.

There is funding for good ideas like three year old Pre-K, Early College High Schools and expanding early college programs and career and technical education. We're grateful for those suggestions. But then again, there is also money wasted on increasing the funding of charter schools and yet another attempt to provide tuition tax credits for private and parochial school tuition. There is also an increase for direct payments to private schools. And some of the funding under the state aid increase can only be secured through successful grant applications. That's never been a help to rural schools that lack the personnel to devote to writing grant applications.

Here are some of the specifics:

1. **Tuition Tax Credits:** The proposal this year is more targeted to low income “donors” and the credit is capped at 75% of up to \$1 million per donation, for a total of \$50 million that otherwise could be used to improve rural schools. However, this year the state will pay private and parochial schools upwards of \$125 million for their prior year aid claims. By contrast, the governor plans to pay our public schools only \$18 million of the hundreds of millions it owes them for prior year aid claims. There’s \$20 million included for pre-school and afterschool programs for private and parochial schools. Finally, there’s a plan to give parents making less than \$60,000 up to \$500 in a tax credit for tuition for each student. That would cost \$70 million. **Tuition tax credits remain a costly diversion of state funds for private purposes-in essence a gift of public funds. Everyone has the right to send their kid to a private school, but not at the expense of our system of public schools that is the right of every New Yorker.** Capping local taxes, not making up the difference in state aid and then giving away state money for private purposes is inappropriate to say the least, and perhaps unconstitutional. Serious budget discussions should not be allowed to bog down over this proposal. We understand the political reasons for this plan being front and center year after year, but the state just agreed to pay these schools over \$200 million for prior year aid claims, while its public schools still wait to have their claims paid. Enough.
2. **The STAR rebate program** would be capped where it stands today and schools would no longer have to wait on the state to reimburse it for reductions in property taxes made by those who qualify. The problem? People will have to pay higher taxes initially and wait to claim the credit on their income taxes. This means those people will be less supportive of local school budgets, knowing that they’ll pay the full cost up front.
3. **Mayoral control of New York City Schools** would be extended until 2019. OK, this is a battle that was lost several years ago and there aren’t many things as far removed from rural schools as New York City education. That doesn’t mean mayoral control is a good thing. Putting politicians in charge of the schools is a bad idea and sets a bad example. It’s undemocratic and ignores the role of locally elected community representatives. It’s been shown to put up barriers to parental involvement. That said, every year that it’s not extended to other cities is a good year and there is no proposal to expand mayoral control in the Executive Budget.
4. The state is sitting on **\$2.3 billion in unprecedented banking fines.** These are not recurring revenues and so we certainly understand why they shouldn’t be used for ongoing programs. Public Education amounts to roughly one third of the state’s discretionary spending. It would make sense to allocate one third of the fines to help public education recover from years of helping the state pay for its budget gap. You wouldn’t have to direct it to the funding base. That would be unsustainable. Understood. So put it toward pre-school construction in rural areas that would never be able to afford to get a pre-school program going otherwise. Give some to schools that can’t afford to wait for the state to reimburse them for fronting the money needed to start a pre-k program. Use it to pay those prior year aid claims the state owes school districts. Rural schools are all for economic development. Nobody needs it more than our rural communities, but if you’re going to freeze local revenue, what incentive do rural schools have to support encouraging economic growth; particularly when it’s apparently at the expense of desperately needed state aid?
5. **Minimum wage increase to \$15.** This one’s a double edged sword. Raising the minimum wage this dramatically would certainly put a strain on school districts to pay its non-instructional staff. In fact, the plan to pay this much to fast food employees might well force school employees to leave the district in favor of those jobs, disrupting school food service. Raising rural wages might also put stress on the few

remaining rural employers and some might be forced out of state. On the other hand, raising the pay of rural residents might also encourage younger rural residents to stay within the community and help stop the outward migration of residents from rural areas.

The elephant (and donkey in this case) in the room of course, is the fact that we now have yet another Executive Budget without the leadership of restarting a workable, equitable and realistic state aid formula for our schools. A lot has happened since we last had a working formula. The courts ordered lots of money pumped into it. The economy tanked and most communities have lost a percentage of their local tax base. Lots of rural schools in particular, have lost enrollment (many of them in dramatic fashion.) We need a formula that accurately reflects the amount a community can afford to contribute and base state aid on that amount; not on what it used to get, not on how politically important its representatives are, but on the difference between what a community can pay and what the court has said constitutes a sound basic education for children. It's tough work, but these are smart and dedicated leaders. It's time to do that tough work.

Taken in total, the Executive Budget is a reasoned and reasonable starting point for serious deliberations. While it is "light" in its state aid allocation, Executive Budgets are always light in their state aid allocations. It's an election year for the legislature and hopefully they will be hesitant to run their campaigns amid local school cuts that only exist because legislators passed a law freezing local revenue. This budget plan is not a bad place to start; much better than in the past couple of years. Having a rational discussion about what's needed, without threats and in the light of full disclosure will be an honest and refreshing approach to the process.

How rural school districts fare in that process will largely be up to the willingness of its state representatives to speak up for their constituents, which often means discord within their respective conferences and disagreements with their colleagues. It's not easy, but it's what they signed up for. Our job (yours and RSA's) will be to educate them on the ramifications of proposals, reactions and compromises. Let them know it matters and that we stand with them. Last year that process ended with significant enhancement of the position of our rural schools. This Executive Budget will not have been the problem if things end badly. It will have resulted from our inability to convince rural leaders to muster the political resolve to demand justice. We must give them that resolve.



EDUCATION INNOVATION SUMMIT!

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REGISTRATION FEE: \$50. Contact Natalie Mitchell at nam33@cornell.edu.

SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE

**RSA Registration Form / Invoice
RSA School Innovation Summit**

Saturday, March 5, 2016

1:30– 5 PM

The Hilton Albany

40 Lodge Street, Albany, NY 12207

Cost: \$50.00 per person

District: _____

Attendee Name : _____ Title: _____

Reservation Deadline – February 29, 2016

Please return completed form with check to:

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275 Flex Warren Hall

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Ithaca, NY 14853

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Rural School Turnaround Leadership: Getting To Outcomes the Local Way

We all know that rural schools are different than urban or even suburban schools. And we definitely know that rural principals are a different breed altogether. So why is it that leadership development programs are one-size-fits-all and most of them aren't a great fit for rural school leaders?

Arguably, traditional leadership development programs miss the mark for rural principals because they don't take into consideration the strengths of rural communities – place, relationships, and resourcefulness - and don't differentiate for the needs of rural leaders. In particular, those who want to dramatically increase academic achievement in schools, or “turnaround leaders,” have to understand that the change in rural communities is local – unique to the school population and a particular community.

Rural communities get at a deep level what larger contexts don't: people matter and change has to be owned locally. It's important, therefore, to start with the question that most plans and proposals fail to ask: who is going to lead that change? After all, what change is there in the world that's ever been credited to a mandate, a funding stream, a training model – or even a good idea? Change always starts with a person. And to cultivate that leader, we need to know the core characteristics of leaders who turn around rural schools; energy, results focus, personal responsibility, commitment to action, an ability to team, and some educational know-how at the classroom level. Ultimately, if change isn't owned by local leadership, it will disappear the moment the outside change agent leaves.

The Rensselaerville Institute has been successfully partnering with rural communities to achieve outcomes for over fifty years. Its signature initiative, School Turnaround, has identified a framework of effective strategies for turning around rural schools. They use a framework, as opposed to a program, because it is nimble and can be tailored to context – something that is critical for rural schools.

As the first step in the turnaround process for rural schools, leaders must recognize an urgent need for change, and focus on what needs to be different as they – and their community – define better life chances for young people. Until leaders are clear about the outcome, there isn't a clear path for any school. In a time of scarce resources, it's more important than ever to know how to line up what's available (and it's often not money – but rather less obvious resources) with locally owned targets for success. This is important particularly in rural communities where financial resources may be scarce, but community members may be ready to help.

And the work doesn't start with failure, but with success. “In education we spend an awful lot of time asking ourselves what causes failure - but who wants to create more failure? That's why we ask *'What does success*

look like and what's currently standing in the way?' Let's assume success is out there!" says Institute president and School Turnaround founder, Gillian Williams. Supporting a results framework for success means getting granular in a hurry. It means getting out from under the piles of emails, the reams of data reports, and the endless meetings outside of your community. It means getting to where the action happens: wherever learning is taking place!

It's important that the strategy for turnaround both honors and includes context. Unlike urban and suburban schools where community often gets ignored, rural communities rightfully won't stand for that. So leaders have to figure out not simply how to cater to stakeholders but how to determine who will "hold the stake" for outcomes and what it will take to include the divergent thinking of these folks. This is particularly critical at a time when there is an unnecessary schism between those who think we should prepare young people for the world beyond their community and those who think we should tie them more tightly to rebuilding their community. Successful rural turnaround leaders help stakeholders see that this isn't an either/or proposition.

Combining this thinking with the use of six core turnaround strategies: diagnosis, target-setting, data use, message and brand, resource alignment, and successful classrooms is what sets rural schools on the path of strategically improving life chances for students.

As a result of seeing a dearth of turnaround leadership development opportunities for rural school leaders, School Turnaround and Emory & Henry College, a rural liberal arts college in Emory, Virginia, have embarked on a joint effort to provide coursework and certification in Rural Turnaround Leadership for those educators who are currently in leadership or ready to embark on leadership. A primary outcome of this program is to create a cadre of people who are qualified to handle turnaround – not just plugging people into desperate situations, but rather getting out in front of failure – being proactive instead of reactive. The rural context is one that has long been ignored by the education reform efforts and the joint skill sets of E & H and School Turnaround provide an insightful and targeted way to help rural school leaders dramatically improve student achievement.

For more information, please contact School Turnaround Executive Director, Bill Clarke, at bclarke@schoolturnaround.org



THE STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT / THE UNIVERSITY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

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January 8, 2016

TO: District Superintendents
Superintendents of Public Schools

FROM: MaryEllen Elia, Commissioner
Thomas R. Burns, Chair, New York State District Superintendents

SUBJECT: Mandate Relief

The past several years have been a time of unprecedented change, marked by many key federal and State initiatives that have moved the Reform Agenda forward and improved opportunities for students. Yet, we all recognize that there has been a great deal asked of local educators.

The State Education Department is working to streamline and simplify the process of implementing the State learning standards, State assessments, and Annual Professional Performance Reviews. While some of the difficult work is behind us, we need to be ~~able~~ to focus on the most important aspects affecting student outcomes, which means prioritizing the work we do so that our limited resources are dedicated to tasks that are essential to improved student outcomes or improved efficiency. To accomplish that, we are asking for your help in identifying the mandated tasks which do not result in improved student outcomes or improved efficiency.

To that end, we are interested in hearing from superintendents and practitioners about the changes that would have the greatest positive impact with the anticipated result that the Commissioner would pursue appropriate remedies.

We ask that all superintendents, after consulting with key stakeholders, submit their suggestions to their BOCES District Superintendent by February 1, 2016, for compilation by the District Superintendents, who will then forward the recommendations to the State Education Department for consideration. We encourage all superintendents to work collaboratively with their district superintendents, engage in conversations on this issue at your monthly chief school officer meetings, and submit your suggestions and recommendations on a regional (BOCES or sole supervisory district) basis where possible.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.



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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR Position Description

R.E.F.I.T. (Reform Educational Financing Inequities Today), located in Long Island, seeks an experienced and dynamic leader to serve as Executive Director. Under general direction of the Board of Directors, the Executive Director leads, directs and administers advocacy efforts to advance the mission of R.E.F.I.T. to support success for all students of member districts.

Desired qualifications would require a minimum of five years of experience in an educational organization or similar organization (school district, non-profit, agency, etc.) with leadership/management/administrative/governance experience, crafting policy, legislative advocacy and a vision for the R.E.F.I.T. This is a part-time position and the annual remuneration is \$12,000. Attached please find the **R.E.F.I.T. Executive Director Position Description**.

R.E.F.I.T. is a consortium of school districts that have joined together to a fair and equitable share of New York State Aid to Education. R.E.F.I.T. believes that school districts are the fulcrum of our villages, our towns and our state. Our legislative leaders, elected by the people, have a moral and legal obligation to provide our students with instructional and non-instructional program parity throughout the state. R.E.F.I.T.'s job will not be complete until the State aid formulas are fully funded. Our children must be provided with the education they need to function in the 21st Century. For more information, please visit our website at refitny.org.

Interested candidates are encouraged to send their cover letter and resume to Dr. Kishore Kuncham, R.E.F.I.T. Executive Director Search Committee Chairperson, Freeport Public Schools, 235 North Ocean Avenue, Freeport, NY 11520 or email same to kkuncham@freeportschools.org by no later than **Friday, February 12, 2016**.



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