

RUST, RENAISSANCE OR REVOLT:

THE STATE OF NEW YORK'S RURAL SCHOOLS

Guide to Improving Rural Schools
2017 Legislative Priorities
Rural Schools Association of New York State





Communities Committed to Educational Excellence



The Rural Schools Association of New York State is a statewide organization representing the interests of, initiating research for and providing services and information to the small and rural districts of New York State.





Rural residents have spoken loudly and clearly. Their issues can no longer be ignored! The economic viability of our rural communities is essential to New York State's future. Our rural schools form the foundation of community life in rural areas and their success determines whether our rural communities will prosper or decline. Simply put, our rural schools are critically important to New York State and 2017 is critically important to our rural schools. Here's what they need once again drive our state's economic recovery and avoid the political upheaval of continuing to turn a deaf ear to their problems:

While the state has made incremental improvements in school aid during the past few years, rural school districts have been starved for resources. Last year, the vast majority of aid went to high wealth districts. Our rural schools are most vulnerable, given their fragile and insufficient local property tax base. The time has come to make amends for having ignored the court ordered state aid settlement. A transparent, equitable and sustainable funding formula must be enacted. The funding formula created in 1999 serves as a workable model, with adjustments for changes needed for the loss of student enrollment and local property wealth incurred during the recession.

No longer can this state tolerate a formula that is manipulated, frozen, deducted from and includes an artificial "floor" that fails to recognize accurate degrees of poverty. If the state fails to utilize a school funding system that relies on local property taxes to offset its cost, it must do so in a manner that accurately adjusts for a community's actual ability to contribute; not on the political implications of change!

In 2017 it will take no less than an increase in state aid of over \$1 billion to simply provide the same level of programs and services our schools currently provide. In rural schools, those programs and services are insufficient to adequately prepare our students for success. It will take a greater investment to address issues associated with English Language Learners, poverty, unaccompanied minors and regional cost differences. Beyond that, the state must make a concerted effort to provide an expanded curriculum in our rural schools, so that rural students are not at an academic disadvantage in their efforts to become college and career ready.

Too much you say? Hardly. The state has decreased the percentage of its contribution to educational funding over the past decade. Its reliance on local taxpayers to pay for its constitutional responsibility to provide a sound, basic education to all students now ranks New York State among the worst in the nation for equitable funding- and our rural schools suffer as a result. Currently, New York State pays less than half of the cost of public education, while almost all other states pay for two thirds of the total cost. In New York, local taxpayers foot most of the bill and since even their contribution is capped, rural kids fall behind.

If New York State would only return to the percentage it paid only a decade ago, our rural schools could not only provide their typical high level of success, they could do it across the range of courses needed to succeed in today's academic and business environment. Think you can continue to ignore them? Look at last November's election results. The silence of rural New York State is a thing of the past.

1. FUNDING REFORM. The recent national presidential election proved beyond doubt that the needs of our rural residents must be addressed. Having been ignored for decades, what was once the mainstay of the New York State economy has eroded significantly. One of the important causes of the decline has been the erosion of curriculum in our rural schools. Lack of educational opportunity compounds the poor job outlook, leading young people to leave their homes. Having left, they are more challenged than their suburban peers, due to the lack of sufficient course offerings in their high school curriculum.

While it is true that the GEA has been eliminated, our rural schools need tremendous resources to provide the state mandated sound basic education required by our state constitution. The tax cap this year is up only slightly, eliminating the ability to raise even the modest resources these communities are capable of raising locally. This makes obtaining sufficient funding for rural schools all the more of an immediate and important issue. New York State must support the Regents' approach of allocating the majority of new funding to high need districts, so that all high and average need districts receive sufficient aid this year. Despite a high average per student expenditure, New York State continues to have the second worst distribution method of education aid in the United States. New York State must prioritize the development of a permanent, adequate and equitable funding formula for school aid. Equitable funding has eluded NYS, despite its tremendous total allocation. Equitable distribution within a new operating formula is of paramount importance.

The old Foundation Aid formula forms a sound starting point, but is seriously outdated. Student enrollment has declined, but poverty and other challenges have dramatically increased. Poverty, the number of English Language Learners and other funding challenges must be addressed. The issue can no longer be ignored. School funding is at a critical point and must be addressed this year.



2. TAX CAP. The school property tax cap has been unnecessarily burdensome. New York State's tax cap is much more restrictive than any other state. (Other states have higher caps and significantly higher percentages of state aid.) While some needed reforms to the cap were authorized last year, including adjustments for PILOTS and BOCES capital construction, the NYS division of the Budget was given the discretion as to whether to initiate this needed reform. They chose not to. This must be reversed with specific, declaratory legislation. The cap's most onerous provision remains: Fluctuation with the Consumer Price Index. Schools are not individual consumers. They don't purchase the same goods and services and consumer costs are not mandated by the state. (For instance, consumers don't have mandated double digit retirement system contributions, or double digit employee health care cost increases. They don't pay liability insurance or Workers Compensation or Unemployment Insurance and they don't run buses for 10 hours per day.) Linking the tax cap to consumer costs is irrational and destructive (particularly when it results in the inability to raise any meaningful local revenue, like this school year.) Its history shows us that school budgets under the cap pass, those over it do not. New York State needs to make school district budgets a matter of local control once again. It should be providing the funding needed by those communities that cannot afford to pay for the education of their children and allowing those that can to do so.

3. EXPANDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES: The Community School construct is vital to rural school district success. As the gap between the wealthy and impoverished widens and the middle class disappears, the collective cognitive abilities of low wealth students entering school has diminished. Language enrichment and learning deficits are embedded before kindergarten and are difficult, if not impossible to overcome later. Rural schools need universal pre-k and afterschool

enrichment, as well as wrap around community services to address the needs of an increasingly poor student population. Funds must be made available consistently to conduct mental health and health care services in the schools, as well as afford rural students the same type of extracurricular activities that put education into meaningful context; the experiences that currently allow suburban students to be so successful. The statistics are staggering and demand the same national and state effort that created public secondary schools during the Industrial Revolution. Funding for program coordinators, pre-school educators, transportation and collaboration with partners such as community colleges and county social service agencies are critically important to the educational success of our students and the economic vitality of our communities.

4. TECHNOLOGY FLEXIBILITY.

The state should increase technology flexibility for instruction, particularly by certifying high quality digital instructional programs as well as teachers. The sophistication of digital learning programs has the capability of dramatically improving the range of curriculum options for rural schools. They are there for the using, but for New York State's outdated laws requiring all courses to be taught, rather than supervised by a New York State certified teacher. Digital Learning Programs that have been certified as effective by the state must be allowed to be offered, with proper supervision. In addition, there is a need for greater access and authority for digital learning opportunities, as well as greater community access to broadband (to ensure student access for homework purposes.) Federal E-Rate, Smart Schools Bond Act and Governor Cuomo's suggested private-public partnership funding (intended to improve broadband access) provide a unique opportunity. Technology Equity must ensure that all students have access to learning opportunities. For those students without the ability to pay for personal devices, the state should provide funding either for the devices themselves or afterschool access to devices in school. New

York State should maximize the likelihood of these combined sources leading to universal broadband access in order to coordinate the provision of greater educational opportunities.

5. STRUCTURAL FLEXIBILITY. In an era of insufficient resources, structural flexibility becomes the key to maintaining educational effectiveness. Collectively, the following changes would have a dramatic impact on rural education.

A. Rural schools need the authority to facilitate college credit collaboration. Districts should be able to join in this effort without it raising either financial or staffing issues. Students need equitable access to dual enrollment programs, minimizing the financial impact of college on impoverished families and encouraging study beyond high school. B. Similarly, schools need to be able to tuition high school students to other high schools without it raising collective bargaining issues. Rural schools simply can't afford to limit course offerings when they could be offered through sharing of staff between districts. C. Schools need the community option of regional high schools and magnet schools for art, or math and science to be shared between districts. Regional high schools have been a successful (even the traditional) model in many other states for over a generation. New York's lack of regional high schools as an educational construct severely limits the educational opportunities of our state's rural students. Districts need the local





option of sharing a high school or a concentration of high school subjects offered at a shared location. D. Rural schools need expanded learning time (longer school day or year) and the funding to support it. With issues of teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse at rates similar to inner cities and with cultural and extra-curricular activities severely limited, one of the most effective ways to improve rural education would be to expand the school day and year. After school and summer programming would provide educational context, expand cultural awareness and decrease social issues associated with idle, unsupervised time for students. For rural schools, expanded learning time is not merely a financial consideration, but must be supported by partners that are often absent from rural communities. As such, partnerships with county and higher educational partners should be expanded. These opportunities must be supported by state transportation aid, as school provided transportation is central to the ability of rural students to attend programming of any kind. Simply put, the difference between rural students and their suburban counterparts is often the availability of social and cultural opportunities offered outside of the classroom. Expansion of these opportunities would provide tremendous educational benefits (through providing a context in which to apply content knowledge) as well as retard negative social influences that impair student success. E. The reimbursement limit on CTE teachers employed regionally by BOCES must be raised to allow schools to collectively employ these critically important positions. There is no program of greater importance in rural areas and no program with a greater likelihood of sustaining rural employment and developing rural communities.

6. REJECT PRIVATIZATION OF OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM.

Opposition to tuition tax credits for donations to private or parochial schools should be a continuing New York State legislative policy priority. Tuition tax credits remove needed funding from existing public schools at a time when those funds are desperately needed by low wealth districts and their students. Privatization sets up a structure that could be used to divert hundreds of millions in school aid away from rural school districts, in favor of private, parochial and charter schools. Supporters claim that public schools would benefit by allowing individuals to donate to our schools too: What they forget to mention is that high need districts can't afford to pay for schools now and private donors aren't lining up to help. Charter schools on the other hand, have a network of donors ready and eager to receive the tax benefits of funneling what would otherwise be state revenue to their privately run enterprises. Other states have a far more equitable approach to tuition tax credits, where they are provided to help special education students, impoverished students and the amount of the credit is limited in both amount and to which parents may receive the credit. New York State has done none of those things. As currently envisioned, donations would be virtually unlimited, tax breaks would be generous and there would be no benefit whatever to any class of challenged students. Since New York State apparently can't support one educational system, it certainly shouldn't be trying to support two. Recently, the state paid prior year aid claims due to private and parochial schools. This assistance was equitable and raised none of the concerns listed above. Having paid this huge sum, there should be no further call for the untoward

policy of providing tuition tax credits to private and parochial school donors. Some candidates for national office have also called for vouchers to allow low wealth students to attend private or parochial schools. This approach should also be rejected for the reasons listed above. The key to educational success across the full spectrum of our students is a strong public educational system. New York's leaders have an obligation to ensure that federal funds are not diverted away from existing federal programs to support private and parochial education.

7. RECOGNIZE RURAL SCHOOLS IN FEDERAL AND STATE REQUIREMENTS.

New York State's special educational requirements far exceed federal law and regulation, as well as those of neighboring states. Our state's laws and regulations in this area are administratively burdensome and so cost prohibitive that special education currently impedes school district ability to provide a sound, basic education for the general population of students. In rural schools this is more than just a social phenomenon, it becomes intensely personal, as the identities of special educational students are well known and the proportionate impact of the cost of special educational services on the school budget is most severe. Matching federal and state requirements would provide predictability between states, eliminate duplicative and often unneeded provisions and increase local district authority in the allocation of resources. To accomplish this, RSA should promote a plan where all state special educational requirements outside of those imposed by the federal government would expire on a future date certain. In the interim, the state would empanel a commission to recommend those New York State anomalies that should be retained. The legislature could then vote to retain aspects of New York law and regulation it deems too important to jettison, while allowing dozens of inappropriate mandates to expire. In addition, the new federal ESSA's proposed regulations ignore the impact on rural schools and their ability to functionally comply. New York's leaders should continue to ensure that our

state's approach to complying with the new federal law recognizes the ability of its rural school districts to participate without severe financial implications.

8. HELP CURB THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC.

Nothing is as destabilizing to rural schools and its children than the current onslaught of opioid distribution and abuse. For schools, this means that high cost special education students are often transferred from one district to another after the school budget has been authorized. Transfer of child custody among relatives is necessary as parents are incarcerated or in treatment. Schools do not have the ability to instantaneously create programs and services for the individual needs of such a mobile student population. Programs of student treatment and prevention are of paramount importance, as are greater enforcement efforts to cease the influx of these drugs. Afterschool and weekend programming is needed to provide an alternative to unsupervised student activity. Parental and family services are vital to stemming the welling tide of drug abuse facing this generation.





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