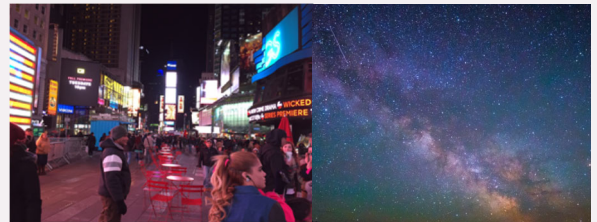




# RSA TODAY

News for New York State's  
Rural Schools

November 2018



I don't live in New York,

I live in New York

**"Communities Committed to Educational Excellence"**

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## The Long Road Back RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK STATE 2019 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

A modern day Grapes of Wrath is being played out before our very eyes. Long Island and New York State's large cities have all either grown in population or held steady in recent years. Not so for our rural communities, where roughly a million people have left since the onset of the Great Recession. Jobs left and rural New Yorkers followed them. Children left for college or work and unlike other states, haven't returned. There's very little opportunity back home for them and our taxes are higher than elsewhere. The one shining light is our rural schools. They graduate over 90% of students. They provide a more individualized instruction, in a caring community. The problem is that the diploma our kids receive isn't competitive in comparison to those received by schools in other regions of our state. There are far fewer advanced courses and a much narrower curriculum: A bare bones diploma that isn't worth a lot to higher education or businesses.

New York State's rural residents are doing the hard work of staying. They're fighting hard with what they have and rural schools often provide the last vestige of economically ravaged communities. A generation ago the rural economy was robust enough to help bail New York City out of financial crisis. Now, for the sake of our great state and our children, it has to be their turn to receive help. We need an economic recovery plan, aid for schools that have fewer but far more impoverished students and a recognition by state leaders that new laws and regulations don't have the same impact on large schools as on our small ones. Large schools shrug and move on-small ones are smothered by heaping new requirements on a few already overburdened staff.

New York State's rural schools can lead us back to prosperity! They are innovative, caring and dedicated. They can help us reclaim our title of The Empire State. Here's what they need:

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. In addition, restrictions on BOCES aid must be updated to accurately reflect current costs, given the vital role that BOCES plays in rural education. In particular, the decades old BOCES reimbursement rate for teachers must be increased to reflect current costs.
  - a. **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).
  - b. **SUPPORTING REGIONALISM:** Rural students graduate with inferior diplomas, because their curriculum is far too narrow. Individual rural school districts simply don’t have the finances to offer courses that other districts take for granted. As a result, rural graduates are denied economic and academic opportunities. School district mergers and consolidations don’t work. They’re expensive due to increased transportation and personnel costs. However, as rural schools continue to prove, regional collaboration is vital. Schools already share resources with other schools and BOCES, as well as localities. Regional high schools allow communities to retain their identity and expand curriculum. It’s a model that has been remarkably successful in other states and on a limited basis on Long Island. New York’s rural schools need legislative authority and financial incentives that would allow for a regional structure and which encourage further regional collaboration.
2. **FOCUSING STATE ATTENTION ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE ISSUES:** Time and again, student mental health is identified as our 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 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. Further, student safety demands immediate attention. Increased funding for School Resource Officers, technical and facility improvements and the use of trained canine units are necessary if we are to prevent further tragedy.
3. **TEACHER SHORTAGE: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF QUALIFIED EDUCATORS:** Rural schools are finding it extremely difficult to find and hire certified educators. Our state’s rural areas have experienced tremendous population loss. The lack of a sustainable rural economy dissuades prospective teachers from working in rural communities. Yet, despite the fact that they can ill afford to compete with urban and suburban schools for staff, rural schools are not exempted from the requirement to employ certified teachers in each subject area. The state must offer additional assistance and scheduling flexibility if we are to address this dramatic shortage. For instance, housing or travel incentives would reduce teacher reluctance to work in rural areas. So too would allowing for greater flexibility in scheduling the school week, as has been done in many rural states.
4. **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 critically needed afterschool, weekend and summer programming. Other uses might include mental and 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. The state should build on its successful Community Schools funding initiative to better serve rural children and their communities.
5. **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 a vast economic desert within the state. New York State must develop and implement a comprehensive economic strategy to return our rural state to a condition of economic viability.
6. **PRESERVING FEDERAL FUNDING PROGRAMS AND TAX EXEMPTIONS:** Proposals by the federal administration have urged the cutting of education funding and have dramatically reduced state and local tax deductions for federal income tax purposes. These are extremely harmful to New York’s rural schools. The loss of property tax deductions in rural areas with large tracts of land will be devastating to the rural economy. Raising local tax revenue in rural communities facing increases in federal taxes from the loss of tax deductions will be extremely difficult. The loss of federal funding for educational programs would be disruptive and place an increased burden on state and local taxpayers.







## **Rural Student Mental Health and Safety Conference** **Friday, December 14th, 2018** **10AM to 3PM** **Crowne Plaza in Lake Placid**



Hear from top experts relaying the most timely and important information to support and protect your students. The conference is planned to compress information into a shorter time frame to allow travel from significant distances. You don't have to live in the North Country to benefit from this high level summit on the most pressing issue facing our schools. You won't want to miss the chance to hear from the experts, as well as discuss implementation with your peers!

We have a lineup of experts from Cornell University and the Mental Health Association in NYS to talk with you about all things mental health: poverty's impacts, outdoor time, environment, the new health curricular requirement, etc. Our aim is for you to leave with a deeper understanding to help inform your responses, together with an array of ideas and tools you can use in the short and near term, with little or no additional resources.

Keynote speaker Dr. Gary Evans from Cornell University's College of Human Ecology will talk about his work looking at how poverty impacts students' ability to learn, and what can be done to ameliorate negative impacts.

He will be followed by the Executive Director, and North Country Regional Support from the Mental Health Association of NY to tell you about the resources they have for implementing the new mental health curriculum requirements.

Dr. Gen Meredith from Cornell will then talk with you about contextual factors that impact student mental health, and ideas for how we can work these to better favor mental health. She is currently researching the positive impacts of students spending time outdoors.

Finally, Dr. Anna Haskins from Cornell will share with you some of her work on how having an absent parent impacts student learning, how these impacts compare other separation traumas (foster care placement, family separation, death of a parent, parental addiction or mental illness, etc.), and give ideas schools can use to help buffer these impacts.

Price is \$75.00 per registrant (lunch is included)

Watch [www.rsany.org](http://www.rsany.org) for registration materials and agenda details to come out around late October/early November

Sponsored by:



## Farm to School Incentive Program

Last year your RSA helped lead a coalition of advocates who secured passage of the nation's most generous Farm to School incentive program. Increasing accessibility to the program for our schools and farms is now the coalition's goal. Both schools and farms need to set up the means for schools to regularly use fresh, locally produced food. The following letter to Governor Cuomo and the appropriate state agency administrators spells out what's needed.



This groundbreaking new incentive firmly establishes New York as a national leader in Farm to School policy, but more importantly, it has the potential to significantly impact the viability of our farms and the health of our children. And we couldn't have done it without your help! **Now, with a new State Budget cycle beginning and new leadership in the State Senate, we must reorganize to maintain and build on last year's success.**

## NEW YORK GROWN FOOD FOR NEW YORK KIDS

November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo  
Governor of New York State  
Executive Chamber  
State Capitol  
Albany, New York 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

Thank you for your leadership in expanding access to healthy food grown and raised in New York for K-12 schools to purchase and serve to our children. At a time when childhood obesity rates have reached new highs and farmers and rural communities are struggling economically, the commitments you made in the 2018 "No Student Goes Hungry" initiative, including creating a New York Grown Purchasing Incentive for K-12 schools and doubling the state's investment in the Farm to School grants program, have the potential to improve our students' health, academic performance, and access to healthy food while at the same time boosting farm income and reviving rural economies in New York State. Additionally, programs that you have championed such as New York Thursdays and New York Grown and Certified have contributed significantly to the growth and success of Farm to School programs across the State.

However, barriers remain for schools that are seeking to purchase more foods from New York farms to serve to our children. Addressing these barriers will unlock the economic development and public health potential of the New York Grown Purchasing Incentive. As a first step this year, modest investments and simple legal changes can be made to help students enjoy more farm fresh New York grown food in school cafeterias. Therefore, we respectfully recommend the following actions over the next year:

### Continue Nation Leading Program to Help K-12 Schools Purchase and Serve more Fresh, New York Grown Food to Students

The New York Grown Food Purchasing Incentive created and funded in the FY2018-19 New York state budget is now the most generous incentive in the country to encourage in-state food purchasing by K-12 schools. In order to maximize participation from schools, which are already in the menu planning stage for the 2019-20 school year, we recommend:

- ♦ Continuing to fund this incentive as an entitlement program in the FY2019-20 state budget to provide a reimbursement of 25 cents per lunch meal to schools that annually spend at least 30% of their lunch dollars on items grown or produced in New York State.
- ♦ Releasing guidelines from New York State Department of Education by the end of November 2018 on how schools can qualify for the increased reimbursement incentive and ensuring that guidelines detail a

process that is both user-friendly for K-12 schools, and stringent enough that it will have a measurable effect on New York farm sales. The overall spending on local products should include any products that are purchased by the district including via grants, reimbursements, or allocations.

- ◆ Providing ongoing, statewide trainings for schools on how to follow these guidelines and procure New York grown food.

#### Expand Access to and Supply of Food Grown by New York Farmers that is Available for Purchase by all K-12 Schools

Administering the New York Grown Food Purchasing Incentive alongside the Farm to School Grants program is critical in helping to increase the ability of schools to purchase and handle foods grown and produced in New York State. The popular Farm to School grants program has begun to make the investments necessary to grow Farm to School by funding the hiring of Farm to School coordinators, purchase of equipment, and training opportunities for school food service workers on how to use farm fresh products. Regional Farm to School coordinators in the North Country and Southern Tier supported by these grants have been instrumental in helping schools purchase local food by assisting with planning, providing necessary technical assistance, aggregating purchasing to increase buying power, and fostering relationships to connect farms with schools.

Continuing to support these activities, as well as investing in the capacity throughout the supply chain to aggregate, process, and transport farm products into schools will help unlock the full potential of the New York Grown Purchasing Incentive while also building market pathways for other institutions to purchase local foods. Additionally, the ability to trace food and raw ingredients back to their source of origin will also be essential to ensure that the New York Grown Purchasing Incentive has the integrity necessary to realize its public health and economic development goals. Over the long term, investing in a coordinated, statewide network of regional coordinators and in the further infrastructure development will be critical to unlock the potential of the New York Grown Purchasing Incentive. Over the next year, we suggest:

- ◆ Appropriating \$3 million for the Farm to School grants program in the FY2019-20 State Budget to meet the current demand for this popular and successful program, and creating a new category within the Farm to School grants for statewide training and support which could be used to hire regional coordinators, deliver broader statewide Farm to School training, and/or build other regional efforts;
- ◆ Building on the state's investment in supply chain infrastructure by creating a \$5 million Farm to School Capital Project Grants Fund through REDCs for school districts, farmers, food hubs, food banks, and processors to invest in capital projects that support minimal processing and packaging, transportation, storage, cooking and/or source verification of New York food products; and
- ◆ Amending State Finance Law to increase the discretionary purchasing threshold for school districts purchasing local food to \$75,000, and providing easy-to-understand guidance and ongoing statewide trainings on how to use informal procurement methods to purchase New York Grown food.

#### Give a New Generation of Students Hands-on Food and Nutrition Education through Eating and Enjoying New York Grown Foods

Children choose and eat more fresh foods in school meals if they are directly involved in growing or preparing them, or if they learn about these foods in an experiential way. Nutrition education, cooking demonstrations, school gardens, farm visits and food tastings are just a few of the activities that New York schools undertake to teach kids about farms and the benefits of healthy eating; lessons that will serve them for a lifetime. Further, when children are more fully engaged in learning about the farm fresh foods they are eating, they bring these lessons home with them, consuming more fresh fruits and vegetables with their families. We recommend that the State of New York promote more of these activities in schools by:

- ◆ Creating a Model New York State School Wellness Policy supporting Farm to School that promotes locally-sourced school meals and links them with increased experiential education such as hands-on lessons, taste tests, school gardens activities, local farm visits, and family engagement.

New York has a tremendous opportunity to build on recent success and continue to lead the nation in increasing access to healthy meals for our schoolchildren while creating substantial economic opportunities for our State's farmers. Thank you for all of your leadership in these areas, and for your consideration of these actions at this critical moment in the year ahead.

Prior is a new New York Grown Food for New York Kids coalition letter to the Governor for your consideration in this new budget cycle. Please read this letter, and if you support these asks which will help K-12 schools purchase and serve more fresh, healthy New York grown food to our children, sign on by **sending me the name, title, and organization of the signatory by noon Friday, November 16<sup>th</sup>**. Please also share this letter and sign on instructions with other organizations that you think might support these asks—the more voices speaking for these priorities, the better we are heard. As always, if you have any questions please don't hesitate to reach out.



If you can't sign on but want to support these asks there are plenty of other ways to get involved! You can join our coalition calls, spread the word to other organizations, and tell stories on social and in traditional media of how Farm to School programs, and state funding to support these efforts, have positively impacted your community. If you'd like to get more engaged or need support in taking these actions, please let me know.

Thank you for raising your voice to improve the health of our children, and the viability of our farms in New York State—I hope you will join us to do the same in the year ahead!

Sincerely,

**Samantha Levy**

**New York Policy Manager**

**(518) 581-0078 • [slevy@farmland.org](mailto:slevy@farmland.org)**

**American Farmland Trust**

*Saving the Land that Sustains Us*

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## Rural American Report 2018

The U.S. Department of Agriculture periodically reports on trends in rural America. The attached report covers the past four years and shows that the population loss in rural areas across the country has slowed. In fact, during that time period, there was an ever so slight increase of about 33,000 people nationwide. The report says that unemployment is a greater problem in rural areas than elsewhere, that Baby Boomers retiring, young people leaving rural areas and even the impact of the opioid epidemic have all contributed to slower economic growth in rural areas than in other places. Rural areas

known to be retirement and vacation destinations of course, have less of a problem than truly remote areas like the upper plains and coastal inland areas of the south. New York State is not identified as being in the worst circumstances, but neither is it improving at more than an incremental rate. Take a look for yourself. The report should match up pretty closely with your own sense of what's taking place around you. Maybe they're right and the worst is over, or maybe the slow improvement nationally is masking New York State's continuing challenges. In either case, the report confirms that rural unemployment is a problem, or mortality rate is increasing, fewer kids are being born into rural areas and the opioid epidemic is taking far too many of our young and middle aged adults. Better? Maybe, but it's still no picnic down on the farm!

Read full report here: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/90556/eib-200.pdf?v=5899.2>





Dr. Gretchen Rymarchyk,  
Deputy Director RSA

## Deputy Directors Corner

### Research News from Cornell

#### New Resources:

##### INSPIRATION

Dr. John Sipple shared at a recent Board meeting that he had been involved in the production of a documentary with Minnesota Public Radio on a career preparation program happening in rural Minnesota, where students get hands-on exposure to a number of locally available jobs and professions. This has promise for improving post-graduation success for students, keeping them local, and improving local economies. See the 26-minute video here, and get inspired!

Ready for the Future: Career Preparation in Rural Communities

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crZWPQPfVHY&t=27s>

##### DATA

The United Way has been working on a dataset called ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. Meaning, they are looking at what is happening with people who are employed, make enough money that they are above the federal poverty threshold, but are still unable to make ends meet. They have created some really nice data visualizations – using the same company John Sipple uses for his education data visualizations, so they may look familiar and be easy to use. Check out NY data by county: <https://www.unitedwayalice.org/new-york>



**NYS PTA Executive Director and RSA board member Kyle McCauley Belokopitsky helps staff the RSA booth at the annual NYSSBA convention in Time Square.**



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