



FIRST ROUND OF RURAL ISSUES FORUMS REVEAL DEEP CHALLENGES

It was an odyssey for the ages. Dunkirk, Oneonta, Madrid-Waddington, Riverhead, Saratoga Springs, West Seneca and Plattsburgh...and that's only the first round! Last month, RSA set out to hear firsthand what's challenging our rural schools. What are the financial barriers? How has the loss of population and business affected us? What issues do we share and which are unique to each area? What laws and regulations most need changed? Each forum provided a vibrant image of life in our rural communities and the valiant efforts of our schools to overcome significant barriers to student success.

Much of what we heard was an affirmation of what has become painfully obvious: The Great Recession robbed our rural communities of much of their economy. When the jobs left, so did families; in a Grapes of Wrath-like exodus. In other states' rural decline caused a migration to urban and suburban areas of the same state. Not so in New York, where a million people left the state in search of a better life. What remains is what National Rural Teacher of the Year Wade Owlett calls "the hard work of staying."

Some of the challenges listed are: 1. Lack of state funding and the failure of the state to accurately reflect the increased poverty in rural areas. 2. Student enrollment decline. 3. Inability to attract and keep certified teachers 4. The need to change laws and regulations that stand in the way of innovative school structuring (like regional high schools, magnet schools, incentivizing tuitioning of students.) 5. The need for transportation aid for pre-school and after school programs and services. 6. The lack of access to broadband internet in rural areas, keeping business away and students behind their urban and suburban counterparts.

As severe as these issues are, they're just the tip of the iceberg in the total list of rural school concerns. Most of the issues are shared among all districts, like the impact of the upcoming U.S. Census on state and federal aid, as well as the decreased numbers of legislators representing our rural communities. Some are unique to a few areas, such as a viable means of transporting Amish students to their schools when their lack of vaccinations forces schools to keep them separated.

The forums themselves proved beneficial in bringing community and school leaders together. State legislators, SUNY college presidents and professors, town and county leaders, State Education Department staff, BOCES program directors and district superintendents, as well as concerned parents, teachers, board of education members and students all joined to provide an accurate picture of what we're facing and offer suggestions for improvement. Media coverage of the forums helped spread awareness of the rural crisis from one end of the state to the other. PBS in Plattsburgh broadcast the entire forum!

Where do we go from here? The plan is to complete the remaining forums over the winter months (we still have forums in the southern Adirondacks and Central New York to go) then bring in education, economic development and other experts to offer their recommendations on addressing the identified challenges. The resulting policy brief will be the subject of an Advocacy Action Plan to turn your best ideas into student achievement. Thanks to all who have participated in the forums! With your help, we can bend once more the hearts of our leaders to the minds of our children.

David Little Interviews:

WCAX: <https://www.wcax.com/content/news/NY-rural-educators-gather-to-exchange-ideas-564574251.html>

Rural Schools Issues Forum Plattsburgh, NY - Weds evening, 11/6/2019 <https://youtu.be/jDzGguhik4I>