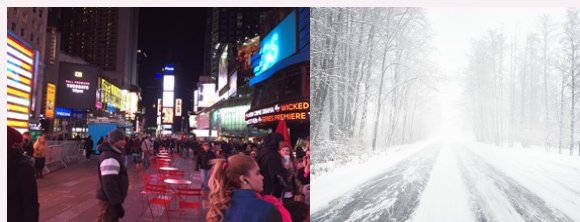




RSA TODAY

News for New York State's
Rural Schools

February 2020



I don't live in New York,

I live in New York

"Communities Committed to Educational Excellence"

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**David Little,
RSA Executive
Director**

TIME TO BUCKLE UP

Now immersed in my 37th legislative session, I feel a little like Farmers Insurance.... I know a thing or two because I've seen a thing or two. In fact, if I haven't sent it all, I've at least heard about it from someone who was involved.

Not many school leaders are trained advocates. You're great educational innovators, community relations specialists, evaluators and many, many other things, but what you know about advocacy you've typically learned on the fly, out of necessity. So when you peek your

head up out of the foxhole and see that the state has some really nasty plans up its sleeve, your reaction isn't often "Great! I love this stuff!"

More likely, you bemoan the loss of important time that must now be spent on convincing sometimes ill-informed state leaders not to do something really harmful. That said, those of you who know me know my personal credo... "I'm not here to tell you what you want to hear. I'm here to tell you what you need to know." So here we go again. You are about to be immersed in the fight of your lives. I'll pause a moment for you to turn

off the tv, put down the paper and tell the pizza delivery guy to hold on a minute. We often talk about how Albany's leaders don't understand the rural condition, the real life impact of their policies on rural schools. There are a million examples (requiring certified subs comes to mind.) What we don't often talk about is our own ignorance of the Albany condition; the pressures and influences on leaders; the political and policy needs that drive them. We are about to learn that our ignorance is not bliss.

So it was for me earlier this week when I met with state legislative leadership and in response to my plea for funding reform, they countered with news that they were in the midst of a battle to keep funding from being yanked from rural schools in order to provide increases to growing, high need districts like New York City. While we're arguing that declining student enrollment demands that the state provide greater resources to counter



Rural schools know that innovation is the key to overcoming many of our challenges. Sometimes to get the job done, you can't wait for the cow to jump over the moon. Sometimes, just sometimes the moon has to jump under the cow. Here, the recent "Snow Moon" was captured under a barn's weathervane. Photo by Dan Little.

our local economic and population losses, our urban-centric legislature is talking about shifting funding away from rural schools in order to give it to schools with more kids. After all, we've always provided state aid per pupil and while rural schools typically have 20-30% fewer students than they did when the formula was enacted, urban areas are growing (some substantially.) This is the argument behind the diverging opinions at this fall's school aid funding legislative hearings when some participants were saying we need to fix the formula and others promoting fully funding the existing formula. Rural schools need it fixed because the formula no longer recognizes our circumstances and needs. Urban schools need the existing formula fully funded because as it stands, the formula spends the money where the kids are and they've got 'em. It's not a theoretical discussion. It's a very real fight for finite resources and the vast majority of legislators in a position to influence that allocation are now from urban areas. When the census documents the loss of rural population this coming year, it will get worse. For all practical purposes, permanently worse.

Historically we get exorcised about the inequities in the formula from September when school begins until April when we get a state budget. During that time the governor proposes several potentially damaging ideas. We (by necessity) divert our attention from the inequities in aid distribution to combat the more immediate threat (think the idea of doing away with the formula altogether from two years ago, or having local districts pay for summer school special ed on their own, or this year's consolidation of aid categories.) By the time the legislature has complied and rejected those proposals, the time for negotiating is over and we're right back to complaining about the distribution of aid for another year. Sound familiar?



This year is looking like yet another Groundhog Day. Meetings with legislative leaders confirm that they are poised to reject the consolidation of aid categories. Given that the state fiscal plan has another \$275 million available for school aid beyond what the governor proposed, they will likely restore the reimbursable aids and be able to provide a typical amount of Foundation Aid as well. As good local stewards, you will then return to your primary task of building a local budget on an insufficient amount of state aid and a lower tax levy cap; not easy work. By the time local budgets have passed and you've attended to wrapping up the school year, summer recess will be upon us. In September we'll get back together and (yet again) start carping about how inequitable the funding formula is.



The difference next year will be that the educational community will no longer be unified. For my entire career the educational community has been in solidarity regarding the need for adequate, equitable state funding. Now it appears that it's every district for itself, as legislators realize how much we already spend and how difficult it is to infuse even greater amounts into funding to ensure that everyone gets all they need. Some have apparently decided that public education needs to cannibalize those who can least afford to defend themselves in order to feed the behemoth that is urban public education. Their claim is that our rural schools are losing students so fast that we can no

longer justify receiving the same amount of money. Eliminate Save Harmless and distribute the aid per pupil so that they can cope with the problems of having more students to educate. The rationale obviously ignores the fact that rural schools, through innovation, shared services and sheer grit have learned to do the job at a far cheaper rate than their urban colleagues.

Fortunately, their demands require their finding a new way to provide rural education and we've been trying to get them to listen to that very idea for years. Allow us to regionalize. Allow us to fully utilize individualized digital learning programs. Give us rural broadband. We're good at doing more with less but you can't tether us to the past and expect miracles. Up until now we've been urging our leaders to realize what's happening out here and provide the resources to succeed. If we don't start on April 2d to embed that message in our increasingly urban legislature, we can expect to have the discussion change to why we need the resources we currently have. I used to end my emails with an eloquent motto "to bend once more the hearts of our leaders to the minds of our children." Now I think we need a more practical catchphrase, like the immortal words of Bet- te Davis: Fasten your seatbelts, folks. It's going to be a bumpy ride.



RSA Executive Director Dave Little will discuss the impact of this year's lower tax cap on rural school districts this Saturday and Sunday mornings on ABC affiliates throughout the state. Please check your local listings for the exact time in your area.



[Click Here](#) to watch RSA's Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Education testimony.

Executive Director Dave Little's testimony begins at [7:30:20](#).



RSA Executive Budget Analysis Testimony

pdf version available [here](#).



David Little, executive director of the Rural Schools Association, speaks about the issues facing upstate schools, including declining enrollment and a lack of job opportunities for graduates. The event was held at Warrensburg Elementary School on Tuesday.

RURAL SCHOOLS FACE DECLINING ENROLLMENT, LESS CLOUT IN ALBANY

WARRENSBURG — Rural schools face declining enrollment, a lack of opportunity for graduates and little clout in Albany to address their issues, according to David Little, executive director of the Rural Schools Association.

Little said one issue is that a lot of people have moved out of the upstate region in the last decade. New York City has gained residents. Long Island and the state's largest cities have stayed stable. But upstate has lost people.

"We had this Grapes of Wrath exodus," he said at a rural school issues forum held on Tuesday at Warrensburg Elementary School.

Little said Gov. Andrew Cuomo has attributed the population loss to people leaving for a sunnier climate, but not everyone is leaving for warmer weather.

People are leaving because of a lack of jobs in rural areas, according to Little. That is harming the communities and leading to societal problems, including increases in alcohol and drug abuse, rising teen pregnancy and an increase in transients. Students have more needs than ever before. There is a lot of anxiety and societal pressures.

Lawmakers in Albany fail to recognize the crisis in rural schools, because they see high graduation rates in rural areas of the state, according to Little.

"Our crisis is the two years after we graduate all those kids, they haven't done anything. They're back from community college. They're back from a four-year college," he said.

Little said 75% of students who graduate from rural school districts never complete even a two-year degree program. They have to take remedial classes to learn skills they did not acquire in high school — despite earning a diploma. Eventually, they get frustrated with having to take classes that do not count to a degree and wash out of college, leaving them saddled with debt and no marketable skills.

Little said that is why rural broadband is as important because it will link students to the rest of the world and help improve their level of education.

Existing companies have done a horrible job. Sprint and T-Mobile are merging and are committed to rural broadband. However, Little said the state has sued to block the merger because they believe it will decrease competition among wireless carriers.

"How many generations of kids have to lose because you want to address competition that doesn't exist?" he said.

Former Warrensburg Board of Education member Elaine Cowin said she worried about the brain drain.

“Our graduates seem to leave and never come back,” she said.

New York state loses about a quarter-million college educated students every year, according to Little.

“In other states, they eventually come home. In New York state, they don’t come (home), because there’s no employment in your home community to come back to,” he said.

The economic development strategy needs to be something more original than putting a casino in every county, according to Little.

Little said it is a two-sided coin — whether to educate children so they have the most opportunities available to them or do you focus on retaining them here and rebuilding the community.

Funding education

Another issue is how the state funds education. Little said the funding formula is politically driven.

“It’s 76 pages of the most godforsaken gobbledygook you’ve seen in your life,” he said.

Little said the state has never really implemented the funding formula that was created as the result of a lawsuit that said schools were underfunded and students were being deprived of a basic education.

However, Little said if the formula were implemented, it would hurt rural schools because it awards aid on a per-pupil basis.

“We lose in a big way. Statistically, we’ve lost about a quarter of our kids,” he said.

Little said he does not believe the money is the issue as the average amount spent to educate a child in New York is twice the national average. The state spends \$70 billion — \$10 billion more than the federal government and more than some country’s gross domestic product. It is the most heavily taxed and heavily indebted state in the nation to pay for education.

However, he said the issue is that school districts in other states get two-thirds of their funding from the state and one-third from local taxpayers. The state provides funding for the basic level of education and communities can supplement with additional programs.

In New York, that is reversed with one-third coming from the state and the rest falls to the local taxpayers, according to Little.

Less clout

Because of the population loss, upstate has less clout in Albany. Some veteran Republican senators are retiring including Sen. Betty Little, R-Queensbury. They perhaps are frustrated being in the minority and not being able to direct policy.

Another issue is that with so many people who have left upstate, the legislative districts will probably get redrawn after the next census. So, rural districts will get even bigger and meaning that residents will have fewer people representing them.

“We’ve already have a lack of state leadership north of the Tappan Zee Bridge,” he said.

The governor, comptroller, attorney general and leader of both chambers are from New York City.

Mandates, health insurance

Another complaint was increasing state mandates imposed on school districts.

“New York state simply doesn’t relieve them,” Little said. “They give you a little more money and they give you more to do.”

There is never any relief because each one of the mandates came from a piece of legislation that had somebody’s name attached to it and nobody wants to let go of anything.

Another concern of the school officials in the audience is the cost of health insurance for small districts. The Affordable Care Act changed the definition of what constitutes a small group for health insurance from between 1 and 50 employees to between 51 and 100 employees.

These small groups are not allowed to participate in an experience-rated plan, which takes into account the health of the members, but are required to go to a community-rated plan. The Legislature has postponed it from going into effect, but school officials are looking for a permanent fix.

“This will hit us at about \$310,000 a year as an increase in our health insurance if we’re pulled out of that small group health consortium,” said Indian Lake Superintendent David Snide.

This was the eighth and final forum the Rural Schools Association held around the state. The organization is taking comments for review by a statewide task force of experts. They will be included in a policy platform to be presented to national and state leaders.

BY: Michael Goot at 518-742-3320 or mgoot@poststar.com and follow his blog poststar.com/blogs/michael_goot/.



REGIONAL RURAL ISSUES FORUMS CONCLUDE WHAT NOW?

could check their accuracy.

From Dunkirk to Riverhead and Oneonta to Plattsburgh, your Rural Schools Association spent the fall hosting a series of Rural Issues Forums across the state. The call went out far beyond the educational community, as SUNY presidents, college professors, state and local legislators, town and county officials, business leaders and community group members all gathered to discuss the challenges facing their rural schools and the communities that support them. At each session we took notes, displaying them on the screen so that everyone

Challenges ranged from universal issues like school funding, transportation forging school-business ties, to more localized (but important) issues, such as how to support your Amish community when their non-vaccinated status precludes them from riding school buses? Now that we have the information, it's up to your RSA to turn problems into solutions. Here's the plan: First the RSA Board of Directors will empanel a group of experts from education, business and government to review the issues, prioritize them and offer suggestions. Since it's unwise to rely on leaders to intuitively know the solutions needed, we'll use the policy brief to educate state leaders on the issues and offer our suggestions to help. Finally, we'll carry out an advocacy plan to keep the issues front and center for an increasingly urban-centric state legislature.

RSA couldn't have been more timely with this effort. In meetings with state officials since the start of the legislative session, we've heard over and over that they need ideas for how to address our state's rural economic and population decline. Legislators who either represent rural areas or are concerned for rural education tell us that they are under increasing pressure to shift resources from rural schools (where student populations have declined) to high need urban areas (where both student need and student numbers are increasing.) We need to be fighting for resources, while offering new ways (such as regional high schools and individualized digital learning platforms) to give rural students the same educational benefits as their urban and suburban counterparts.

If you are interested in participating in the task force panel that will review the issues and offer suggestions, or if you know of an expert who would be of help in this effort, please email us at dal295@cornell.edu.



RSA Executive Director joined RSA Directors Kyle Belokopitsky (NYSPTA) and Heather Zellers (Seneca Falls Board of Education) at a Capitol Press Conference opposing the legalization of marijuana for recreational use.

RSA recently participated in a press conference highlighting the implications of legalizing marijuana for recreational use. Mental health experts, law enforcement officials and statewide school advocates came together to lay out information on the increase in traffic fatalities involving marijuana use in states where it has been legalized. Similarly, teen suicides and instances of the onset of schizophrenia have spiked in those same states. RSA's point was that New York State (like many) has not prepared for the impact of marijuana legalization any more than it planned for the impact of vaping, alcohol or tobacco legalization. With marijuana in particular, access by underage students is virtually assured, given socialization between students and recently graduated (and legal) purchasers of marijuana. The issue has been proposed in the Executive Budget (given that it has been unable to pass the legislature on its own merits in the past.) If the state is so desperate for revenue, according to Little, it must account for the social, educational and medical effects of legalized use. To date, it has done none of those things.





Dr. Gretchen Rymarchyk,
Deputy Director RSA

THE CORNELL CONNECTION

RESOURCE: Student Mental Health Resources page on RSA website

As promised, we put up a Student Mental Health Resource page on the RSA site, populated with many items from the panelists we had at our December event in Latham. You can find the page here: <https://www.rsany.org/copy-of-resources-1> Or, you can go to www.rsany.org, hover your cursor over the “Features & Services” menu across the top of that page, and near the bottom of the menu that drops down, click on “Student Mental Health Resources.” This page is a work in progress:

- * We already have more resources to add;
- * We will add a button for you to request packets of handouts from the December Event;
- * We will be adding brief descriptions of what you can find when you click on each of the logos;
- * We would like to incorporate any constructive feedback you would like to offer, so please send us your thoughts: GKR1@cornell.edu

Summer Conference

Our Summer Conference page is up. It is a bit thin right now, but by the end of this month, you will begin to see the program take shape. Registration will open in early May, as usual.

Thank You

Many thanks to those who took our Rural Suicide Prevention Survey. This information will inform a workgroup RSA participates in. This workgroup is charged with sending recommendations to update NY’s rural suicide prevention policy. Our work should wrap up next month. Also, we will send survey results out to those who took the survey, and if we can get permission, we will also post this on the Student Mental Health Resources page of our website, mentioned above.

RESOURCE: NY’s Farmworker Families and Rural Schools

There are MANY undocumented workers in rural NY, with children in our public schools. These children are often dealing with tenuous situations at home, missing family members, or not living with family at all. There are lots of ways schools can support these children – and lots of ways our business-as-usual processes can jeopardize these families and children. We recently spoke with Mary Jo Dudley, the Director of the Cornell Farmworker Program (website: <https://cardi.cals.cornell.edu/programs/farmworker/>), who said she often gets called to schools in the middle of a crisis because the school, in trying to help, recognized things were not going as expected. While Mary Jo is grateful that schools do reach out when they need help, she would much prefer to speak with schools BEFORE a situation arises, so you have the information you need to successfully navigate the special considerations of this population. She would also love to speak to larger audiences (rather than with only the personnel immediately involved in a singular case). If your district, BOCES, and/or community would like information on how best to work with students of undocumented families, please contact the Cornell Farmworkers Program at Farmworkers@cornell.edu

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