

Dear Rural School Leaders,

Each day seems to bring additional challenges. Today had more than its share, as we learned that schools will not only be closed for an additional two weeks, but that state school aid will be reduced from even the insufficient amount projected in the Executive Budget. If we are to endure cuts, they need to be made in an equitable and minimally harmful fashion. RSA is advocating that any cuts be done using the methodology employed when the GEA was restored, i.e. cutting the wealthiest districts first and most and saving as much educational programming as possible at our fiscally challenged schools. Below is a letter sent today, Friday, March 27th to Governor Cuomo, Education Interim Commissioner Tahoe, Assembly Speaker Heastie, Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, Assembly Education Committee Chair Michael Benedetto and Senate Education Committee Chair Shelley Mayer.



New York State's problem has never been about the total it spends on public education (first in the nation), but in the way that funding is distributed (last in the nation.) This letter shows our leaders a better way. We hope that you will join your RSA in contacting your representatives in urging this approach to any aid cuts that may be required by the pandemic.

Thank you, as always for your efforts during this crisis!

STATE AID LETTER TO STATE LEADERS

Dear Governor Cuomo, Commissioner Tahoe, Speaker Heastie, Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, Education Committee Chairs Benedetto and Mayer,

This morning, schools simultaneously learned that they will both be physically shut out of their buildings for another two weeks and that state school aid is likely to be greatly diminished. No one recognizes the impact of this pandemic more than our schools and with the exception of the health care industry, no one is doing more to ensure the progress of our state during this extraordinary time.

We have dozens of questions that will be vitally important as we move forward and we will wait to ask them of you. However, some questions can't wait and those related to our state budget are among them. While 46 other states have the ability to wait several months to see how their economy reacts, we have only a couple of days until our constitutional state budgetary deadline. As the governor has requested the ability to adjust the state budget and payments on a quarterly basis and given the fact that he has been specific in indicating that state aid to public education cannot proceed as usual (given its proportion of now depleted state revenue) the method of state aid distribution becomes of paramount importance in determining our state's future.

To date, our state is recognized both for its fiscal focus on public education (spending the most of any state per student on average) and for the limitations of its inequitable and highly politicized aid distribution formulae and mechanisms. On behalf of the fiscally challenged

schools of our state (and particularly our rural schools that face significant challenges beyond the financial) I write to ask that we collectively learn from past mistakes and deploy state aid cuts in a manner that preserves education for our most vulnerable schools and the communities that support them.

When the Gap Elimination Adjustment was instituted during the Great Recession, the state made the lion's share of its initial cuts to schools that were least prepared to cope with the loss. We cut aid first and most to our poorest schools, exacerbating their comparative lack of curricula, counselors and enrichment activities. Despite their inspirational ability to innovate, these same schools are currently coping with the loss of 1.4 million residents, tremendous employment and business losses, the lack of broadband internet access, increased poverty and other factors that make it extremely difficult for their students to receive an education allowing them to compete in a modern economy.

Our GEA methodology looked to these schools simply because statistically, that is where most of state aid is spent. The result was horrific, placing our most needy schools at a disadvantage for a decade; a disadvantage from which many have never fully recovered. Now we are facing a crisis every bit as daunting as that economic recession and we need a more sophisticated approach than John Dillinger's historic motivation for robbing banks because that's where the money is.

Fortunately, we needn't look further than how that aid was later restored. The GEA was subsequently restored to wealthier school districts last, allowing available revenue to benefit those fiscally challenged districts most at risk of falling short of the state's constitutional obligation to provide every child with a sound education. Those who had been left comparatively harmless at the outset were the last to see full restoration, based on the premise that their community wealth allowed them a degree of self-reliance unavailable to needier communities.

During our current crisis, we can benefit from our prior mistake. In this current iteration of required state aid limitations, we can go first to our wealthier neighbors and require their forbearance while the state saves the education of our most vulnerable students. We can preserve essential educational programs over the maintenance of educational luxuries. This time we can avoid harming school districts already teetering on the brink; school districts that last year used their reserves at twice the rate of wealthier districts, taxed at half the rate of other districts (in an attempt to avoid driving out their remaining residents and businesses) and that struggle to attract and retain certified educators.

This time, let's use the methodology we used to restore the GEA, rather than the one we used to institute it. Let's be progressive, rather than regressive in our approach. Let's allow our fiscally challenged school districts a chance to rebuild from this crisis alongside the rest of the state and not endure again the past treatment that resulted in their recovery taking years longer than their more privileged neighbors.

This time let's do it right. This time let's be the Family of New York. On behalf of our state's 320 rural school districts, I remain

Respectfully yours,
David A. Little, Esq.
Executive Director