

RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION 2020 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

- 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 continue to decline, 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.
- 2. 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.)
- 3. SUPPORTING REGIONALISM:** Rural graduates struggle because their curriculum has been far too narrow to allow them to compete with their urban and suburban peers. 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 lative Priorities academic opportunities. School district mergers and consolidations have usually not been the answer. 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. State assistance for "tuitioning" of students to neighboring districts would provide needed curriculum expansion for kids

4. FOCUSING STATE ATTENTION ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE

ABUSE ISSUES: Time and again, student mental health is identified as our society's most pressing challenge. 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 and families. Increased mental health services are needed to help them cope with circumstances we find hard to envision. Lack of funding has decimated mental health services to rural students. Guidance counselors, school psychologists and social workers are vital to a child's educational success and the future viability of rural New York State.

5. TEACHER SHORTAGE: RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF QUALIFIED EDUCATORS:

Rural schools are finding it extremely difficult to hire and keep 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. Most importantly, certification areas must be expanded to more easily recruit qualified educators in rural school districts.

6. DEVELOP STATE AND FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR RURAL BROADBAND CAPACITY: Access to broadband internet service is vital to both rural public education, as well as expansion of the rural economy. Simply put, our students need it to compete with their peers from urban and suburban areas, rural businesses need it to compete and thus employ those students. The absence of rural broadband is extremely detrimental to both students and our economy. Bringing broadband to rural areas has been delayed for far too long. Funding is available, programs are underway but have been fraught with bureaucratic wrangling and corporate failures. Yet, technological capabilities continue to expand and offer opportunities for rural schools and communities. RSA emphatically urges our state and federal governments to successfully implement this vital service.

7. SUPPORT CENSUS REPORTING: Population loss in rural New York State has the potential to further damage both rural education and the viability of rural communities. Counting all rural residents of our state is vital to preserving critically important federal and state funding. Census efforts in rural areas require more intense staffing and additional time, due to greater distances and sparse population density. If rural residents

are not properly counted in the census, not only will aid be diminished, but legislative districts will decrease in number; fewer districts means less representation on key rural issues.