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Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES

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Good morning.

My name is David O'Rourke, and I'm the District Superintendent and Chief Executive Officer of the Erie 2-Chautauqua-Cattaraugus BOCES. Today I'm speaking as a representative of the District Superintendents in New York State, who serve the Commissioner of Education as field representatives in much of New York State. As a DS, I've served as past chair of the BOCES and School District Operations and Finance Committee – a group that has worked to examine the administration of school funding in New York State.

I want to thank Senators Shelley Mayer and Brian Benjamin for hosting the roundtable discussions in New York State in the past months, as well as this hearing today.

The Problem of Inequality

The impact of per-pupil spending has been demonstrably linked to availability of school programs, as well as improvement of student achievement – particularly in high poverty communities.

New York's system of funding schools through property taxes and state aid has not produced outcomes that most educational leaders would see as fair to all students. While it is true that New York State boasts some of the highest performing schools in the nation, supported by tax bases and state aid allocations that fund per-pupil expenditures that are commensurately high, the system also barely affords a basic sound educational program for far too many students in high poverty urban, small city, and rural communities as well.

Despite significant investment of state resources, New York's State's system of school finance perpetuates some of the widest disparities of school program offerings in the United States. A recent analysis by Bruce Baker at the Center for American Progress found New York State either the third or fourth least equitable state in the country in per pupil spending, depending on the measures that are used.

Poverty's Impact

In fact, high poverty, high need school districts in New York State require resources that far exceed those school districts serving higher wealth communities. State and federal divestment from social support and mental health services has placed those needs squarely within the walls of schools serving high poverty communities. Schools in poverty communities today contend with struggling to meet basic human needs for our students. In addition to basics such as school supplies, schools must provide breakfast nutrition, summer breakfast and lunch programs, after school care and programming, family counseling, mental health screening, and much more.

Rural Schools

As District Superintendent of a BOCES serving small city, suburban and rural districts, the impact of the New York State school finance system has left many poor rural schools with few options to provide academic programming beyond basic requirements. Too many students in rural schools have no access to Advanced Placement Courses or advanced college-credit bearing classes. Technology-facilitated course sharing and other BOCES programs often can improve these conditions, but far too many rural schools cannot support both their own basic program and other options for students. Rural communities experience poverty's student impact just as acutely as urban or small city system – and often with fewer broad systemic resources to address poverty's impact.

While rethinking the Foundation Aid Formula, it may be tempting for political leaders to re-examine so-called “hold harmless” provisions of state aid, which protect districts from losses when they experience significant declines in enrollment. These provisions should be treated with care, however, as eliminating “hold harmless” provisions quickly would no doubt further harm students in rural schools long before communities had opportunities to examine possibilities for reorganizing schools.

It is also worth noting that the legislature has made merging school districts more difficult since the 1990s. Since then, existing incentives have been insufficient to spur many reorganizations. And even if school mergers could be attained, in many communities, combining multiple school districts would not improve the long-term problems faced by rural education systems: sparsity of population, diminished tax base, and significant poverty.

Foundation Formula

This testimony does not attempt to address technical specifications within the Foundation Aid Formula. After all, these measures should address issues of fairness and school resource distribution. However, many definitions of fairness compete within the formula. For instance, is student poverty more important than high property taxes? The current formula attempts to address both issues. As a result, specific measures within the formula that intend to drive resources toward higher need systems are blunted by other measures that protect resources for broader distribution to lower-need systems. In this context, it is worth noting that few

school leaders or policy makers fully understand all elements impacting New York State Aid. Some would argue that this is by design.

Even though it would be more politically difficult, a clearer focus on student need and especially poverty would prioritize young people's learning needs above all else. This should be the aim of a state aid system that strives to offset program inequalities between high wealth and low-wealth systems.

Cost Driven Aids Improve Equity

As a related matter, it is deeply concerning that the Governor's office has proposed elimination of specific cost driven aids in recent years. Transportation Aid, BOCES aid, Textbook Aid, and other cost-driven aids are a source of equity in school aid distribution. In general, allocations of these aids are higher for higher poverty school systems with less capacity to raise revenues locally. BOCES aid, in particular, supports programs for students that schools would have no capacity to support on their own, such as Career and Technical Education programming. I urge you to protect these equity-focused aids in any discussion of reforming school finance in New York State.

The Limits of Compromise

A student's zip code should not determine limits on their school program experience – but the current political compromises within the New York State Aid formula have ensured that it does just that. And while aid distribution is a complex political problem, a clear test of rethinking the Foundation Aid Formula will be whether our students who need the most to succeed get the highest and clear priority in the distribution of New York State school aid.

Thank you, again, for hosting this conversation and facilitating this important work.



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District Superintendent/CEO