

New York State Senate
Standing Committees on Education and Budget and Revenues
Public Hearing on the Foundation Aid Formula
Testimony by Prof. David C. Bloomfield*
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Thank you for this opportunity to address our broken system of school finance. I hope the Committees recognize that the problem is not just Foundation Aid but structural imbalances in school funding that create a politicized system of haves and have nots, leading to chronic, critical inequities in our social fabric.

The winners tend to be wealthier suburban swing districts. The losers are rural and urban school districts where individual legislative accountability is less direct and party control of these seats more assured.

The profound effect of this political mismatch is that needier districts are disproportionately dealt out of Foundation Aid, which was originally meant to close the gap.

So statutory reform of Foundation Aid will not solve the problem of inequitable and inadequate state aid. The formula is broken because, at bottom, it is based on political rather than educational considerations. The solution is to rearrange the legal equation to reflect equitable educational finance as a right, not subject to the exigencies of political might. We need to see the issue as one of promoting the civil rights of all students.

Solving such a big problem requires a big idea: a constitutionally required escalator that automatically raises the level of each district's state funding to match per pupil spending by our wealthiest districts. This new funding structure based on a standard of educational excellence would permanently correct the otherwise intractable power imbalance favoring wealthy districts, bringing a new level of educational quality and equality to all the states' children and an ensuing level of prosperity for all New Yorkers.

Moving beyond the false promise of judicial rescue through Foundation Aid will require a constitutional amendment to replace the Court of Appeals' "sound basic education" adequacy standard with a standard of "educational excellence" tied to funding levels our wealthiest residents deem appropriate for their own children.

The excellence escalator will assure that state aid meets or exceeds the per pupil spending in our wealthiest districts. While expensive, the sticker shock of the state providing highest-level funding can be mitigated by adjustment of aid for individual district measures of student need and local capacity, formulaic data already available and largely immune to political manipulation.

In practice, our wealthiest districts would receive zero state dollars but no ceiling on local spending. Districts of similar wealth that chose not to tax at that level would also

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receive zero by failing to meet local capacity. But districts that taxed to the max would be rewarded by state assistance to meet the highest levels of per pupil district spending.

As a result, the excellence escalator is less radical than it seems. It does not discourage local spending and maintains local school taxes as the bulwark of our system of school finance. But, as a constitutional guarantee, the provision assures that the state will match funding to levels of real world spending that currently benefits only our most well-off students.

Besides providing a greater degree of educational equity, the escalator would dramatically encourage desegregation by removing a major obstacle to families' movement between districts: the quality of schools. By diminishing the gap in per pupil spending between districts, a major reason for our entrenched enclavism, a growing hole in our social fabric could be mended.

The path forward for the excellence escalator is not free of the same politics that currently traps us in the broken system of Foundation Aid. But it is a one-time fix, requiring approval by two successive legislative sessions and a voter referendum. Today's problem is a constant battle, fought every year against impossible odds.

A constitutionally mandated school funding excellence escalator would turn the tide toward educational equity and quality, a big idea whose time has come.

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