

Cornell Office &
Rural Schools Program

Cornell University
Warren Hall 275 Flex
Ithaca, NY 14853



Latham Office
24 Century Hill Drive,
Suite 200-A
Latham, NY 12110
dal295@cornell.edu
Tel: 518-250-5710
Cell: 518-888-4598

TESTIMONY

RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK STATE

BEFORE THE

NEW YORK STATE JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET HEARING

THURSDAY, JANUARY 28, 2021

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED BY

DAVID A. LITTLE, Esq.

Executive Director

Dear Chairs Weinstein, Kreuger and Members,

I am David Little, Executive Director of the Rural Schools Association of New York State, testifying today on behalf of nearly one half of our state's school districts and one third of our students. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about the plight of our rural schools, the communities that support them and the dramatically inadequate addressing of their needs by our state. The 2021-2022 Executive Budget reveals either a deep seated lack of awareness of the challenges facing our rural residents or a measured neglect of their continuing struggles. Year after year the state has offered little to no assistance as more than a million New Yorkers have fled the rural areas of our state in search of a better life. School districts have experienced a decline in student enrollment never before seen. The curriculum of our rural schools has been narrowed and hollowed out to the point where many struggle to offer even the state mandated coursework needed for graduation and despite the fact that our rural high schools have a high rate of graduation, their coursework and lack of support has led to a dismal rate of completion of even community college programs.

Nowhere is the state's lack of concern for the rural condition more pronounced than in the Executive Budget. In four days of State of the State messages and a lengthy Executive Budget presentation, rural concerns were ignored. Indeed, the totality of rural programs consisted of the renovation of the Whiteface lodge and a proposed Washington County solar project. The remaining references consisted of the use of rural New York to transmit cheap power to New York City. The governor referred to the lack of broadband internet service (so forcefully displayed in rural areas' inability to teach remotely electronically) as an issue in urban minority communities and as a problem of affordability since 98% of our state's residents (he claims) now have broadband access. This is patently absurd and can only be concluded if one accepts the claim by providers that if anyone in a given coverage zone has access, then everyone in that coverage zone is counted as having access. Make no mistake, rural New York State does not have broadband access in thousands and thousands of homes, precluding students from receiving a viable, constitutionally protected public education.

Our state ignores its rural schools at its peril. As our schools lose courses in civics, the arts and many others, our students lose the ability to think critically and express themselves in debate without exposing a parochial world view. Rural New York has perhaps rightly come to the conclusion that its government has infrequently expressed concern for or come to the aid of their issues. Poverty has increased without a state response. Mental health needs of its children have gone unaddressed. There is no comprehensive plan to develop our rural economy into the vibrant economic engine that once funded the New York City recovery from near fiscal disaster. Like Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, our own residents have been forced from their homes and the communities in which they were raised in order to survive. It is a tragedy of historic proportions.

There is no question that the entire state faces dire economic circumstances, but the state has entered into a budgetary approach from which our rural communities may never recover. This will have an effect much greater than merely missing the opportunity of the national

phenomenon of people relocating from urban areas to rural ones, now that we have learned that our workers needn't be located in office buildings in those urban areas. The result could well mean the infrastructure of our rural areas cannot be supported in the future. In the midst of this crisis, the Executive Budget draws on tired approaches to the funding of public education that severely affect rural school districts in particular.

The FY2022 Executive Budget provides a year-to-year increase of approximately \$2.1 billion for the 2021-22 school year, but this increase is largely driven by the \$3.9 billion allocated to school districts under the federal CRRSA Act and \$400 million in previously authorized federal funding, more than offsetting a **\$607 million decrease in State support**.

Specifically: The plan calls for a \$393 Million Reduction to 2021-22 Services Aid. **Eleven existing expense-based aids totaling \$3.7 billion for the 2020-21 school year, including Transportation Aid and BOCES Aid are consolidated into a new block grant called "Services Aid."** Funding for these aids in 2021-22 is reduced to \$3.3 billion. This reduction is fully offset for each school district by its allocation of CRRSA funds in this year. These spending reductions may be restored if the State receives requested Federal COVID relief funds. Growth in these existing aid categories would be eliminated and (if accepted by the legislature) this proposal would require future State funding increases to be allocated through the Foundation Aid formula, rather than as a reimbursement. Rural schools can ill afford to lose the certainty of the availability of BOCES programs and services. The sharing of services is the hallmark of New York State's educational system; the envy of the nation and the Executive Budget undercuts (in both funding level and structure) this vital element of our educational system. How can BOCES be expected to purchase the needed equipment to run career and technical programs that are so critically important to so many students if there is no expectation of school districts being reimbursed for their participation in these programs? Cutting these aids by \$393 million is breaking the promise the state made when these school districts spent funds in good faith. The benefit of flexible funding always seems to be wedded to the requirement of dramatic cuts in aid. When the money has already been used and local tax increases in rural districts often amounts to next to nothing, this is simply unacceptable.

GEA, thy name is now "Local District Funding Adjustment". Learn the name, it'll be with us a while! The Executive Budget calls for a \$1.35 Billion Local District Funding Adjustment (reduction in aid) for the 2021-22 School Year. A Local District Funding Adjustment would be levied against other reimbursements to school districts outside of what are now known as "reimbursable aids.) This \$1.35 billion reduction to current law projected aid for the 2021-22 school year would be fully offset by school districts' federal CRRSA funds and the reduction may be restored if the State receives requested Federal COVID relief funds. However, history tells us that as soon as federal aid stops, the state is left with a multi-billion aid gap to fill. Last time (GEA during the Great Recession) it took the state over a decade to get to pre-recession aid levels. The time needed for the state to recover its pre-recession aid level would take up the entire educational career of a

student; from kindergarten to graduation. Our children deserve a better preparation for life than the systematic defunding of their educational programs.

Let's review so far: The state is significantly cutting school aid: \$607 million this year and \$1.5 billion over two years. It's cutting aid for BOCES, transportation aid, special education, etc. (the so called "reimbursables") and turning what's left into a block grant based on the Foundation Aid formula (a formula that year after year ignores the needs and economic circumstances faced by rural students.) Schools will get a significant net increase because federal funding allocated to NYS so far is directed specifically for schools. Federal funding increases should cover expected losses in the state's contribution for the next two years. None of this takes into account the impact of the proposed \$1.98 trillion federal recovery act funding proposed by President-Elect Biden. The Executive Budget plans to use those funds to backfill its aid cuts if that legislation is passed. Again, this leaves a gap when federal aid dries up and is dependent on the governor's future generosity.

Other notable effects:

1. Districts would be **reimbursed for pandemic related transportation** (and meal delivery) expenses the state claimed could not be paid without authorizing legislation. The Executive Budget makes no mention of paying these expenses in the coming year.
2. The governor's budget plan would **eliminate teacher support programs**, including the Teachers of Tomorrow and the Teacher Mentor intern Program. There is no mention of the critical state of teacher recruitment and retention in rural areas, no plan to address this significant challenge.
3. **Eliminate Prior Year Aid Queue.** The FY2022 Executive Budget proposes to eliminate \$18.7 million in funding for school districts' prior year claims and expunge all claims currently in the queue. The Executive Budget proposes eliminating the PYA queue altogether. These spending reductions may be restored if the State receives requested Federal COVID relief funds. This is quite simply, unconscionable.
4. **Reduce Funding for Library Aid.** The Executive Budget reduces FY2022 funding for Library Aid by 5 percent, from \$91.6 million to \$87 million. This funding provides operating support to public libraries, library systems, and reference and research libraries, entities that are crucial to the rural experience.
5. **District distribution to high need buildings required:** The Executive Budget requires all districts to allocate their state aid most heavily to high need buildings within their districts (indicating the governor's attempt to shift focus away from the state's reductions and onto the district's responsibility to allocate funds equitably within its borders.) The fact that this featured aspect of the governor's approach to educational equity has no relevance to rural districts (that typically have one building at each level; elementary, middle school and high school-often all shared in one building), amounts to an unnecessary reporting requirement. For rural schools, the lack of equity is in the totality of state funding, not the local distribution of those resources.

In short, the Executive Budget approaches the state deficit in exactly the same manner it did over a decade ago during the Great Recession. It cuts aid to schools and to the extent federal law allows, replaces its aid cuts with temporary federal stimulus funds. It again proposes making long term changes to BOCES, Transportation, Special Education and Building Aid that would both cut total aid and then distribute what's left according to district wealth, rather than reimburse it for amounts actually already incurred. **It takes money from above, as well as below in seeking additional resources from the federal government, while starving its schools.**

We've been through this before. We know that the result is that temporarily, schools will be fine (if we ignore the lower 1.23% tax cap on local revenue.) We know too that the minute the two years of federal money dries up, the state is once again unlikely to be able to fill its aid cuts, leaving districts with billions in lost aid. There is no ignoring that the state is in a dire fiscal state, though increased revenue above state projections show that dire state to be diminished from what was previously announced. The amount of additional aid coming from the federal government under the new administration could significantly affect this scenario, allowing direct aid to the state to prevent the hole from being dug in the first place. The state legislature has traditionally rejected the governor's aid cuts and system dismantling of the reimbursable aid categories. Its action this year, in this economic and health crisis is needed all the more.

Only through your collective leadership can the state avoid past mistakes and a generation of underfunding to the education of its children. The cuts must be avoided now, not restored later. This is the intent of the federal aid provided and you must ensure its proper use. New York State has seen fit thus far to starve its rural schools through an artificially low cap on local revenue, then withheld state funding to provide even minimally sufficient resources to uphold its constitutional responsibility of providing a sound, basic education to its children. To rectify this catastrophe, it must reform its funding distribution system that is annually listed as among our nation's worst. Federal funding must be used as the one time revenue it is, rather than for recurring expenses that will require elimination as soon as that stimulus is removed.

We can be smarter than the last time we faced these circumstances! We must be if our rural communities are to survive and our rural children are to remain in New York State. Make no mistake: The neglect of rural New York State imperils the state's financial foundation and its future viability. No passport is required to relocate to other states and our recent history proves that our residents avail themselves of that option. Whether they remain to help rebuild the future of the Empire State or seek a future elsewhere, we have a sacred responsibility to provide them a competitive education. We are failing and only your intervention can change their future, our future.

Thank you for this opportunity.

Respectfully,

David A. Little

Executive Director

Rural Schools Assn. of NYS

RSA 2021 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

- 1. REFORMING THE STATE AID FUNDING FORMULA TO ACCURATELY ADJUST FOR POVERTY, SPARACITY AND OTHER COSTS:** If the state simply updates the current formula, our state's rural schools will continue to decline, due to the loss of enrollment. If rural school districts are to address the needs of their changing student population and avoid a downward economic spiral (lasting decades) the desperately needed new funding formula must adjust for increased poverty, increased numbers of English Language Learners, transient students and other challenges. 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. 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. It was true before the isolation and added stress of the pandemic and it is a glaring societal need now. Mental health issues and substance abuse are wreaking havoc on rural children and their ability to learn; 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 school 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.

3. DEVELOP STATE AND FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR RURAL BROADBAND

CAPACITY: If the pandemic has proven anything, it is that access to broadband internet service is vital to both rural public education and expansion of the rural economy. When society must rely on remote learning, rural students are incapable of receiving their constitutionally protected public education. Simply put, our students need broadband internet to compete with their peers from urban and suburban areas, rural businesses need it to exist (let alone 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 as a public utility in the same way that our predecessors electrified and provided telephone service to rural areas.

4. USE THE NEED FOR CHANGE RESULTING FROM THE ECONOMIC CRISIS TO IMPROVE THE DELIVERY OF RURAL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES AND PREVENT THE DECLINE OF RURAL INFLUENCE IN STATE POLICYMAKING.

The 2020 census will reveal a sharp decline in rural population. This will quickly translate into decreased rural representation in governmental decision making. Rural areas already suffer from a lack of understanding on the part of officials of the differing impact of policies on rural schools. This stems from a lack of personal experience with the realities of rural life. Consequently, policies are proposed that simply don't work in rural areas; or worse, are unintentionally harmful to rural schools. As the state adjusts to the economic impact of the pandemic, it must avoid making changes that damage an already struggling rural education delivery system. As the pandemic and broadband internet service alter public education, New York State must counteract negative policy implications in the reimagining of education and use RSA's knowledge to propose and advance efficiencies and improvements in our rural educational delivery system.

5. SUPPORTING REGIONALISM: Today, more than ever, 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 academic opportunities. School district mergers and consolidations have usually not been the answer. However, as rural schools continue to prove, regional collaboration and technological innovation are 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 Long Island. New York's rural schools need legislative authority and financial incentives that will 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. In addition, remote learning has proven itself effective enough to demand that rural curriculum be allowed to expand using advanced, remote learning strategies.

- 6. 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 and prevents rural school districts from paying competitive salaries. Yet, despite the fact that they can ill afford to compete with urban and suburban schools for staff, rural schools have no flexibility in state certification requirements. The state must offer additional assistance and certification 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.
- 7. SUPPORTING "UP FRONT" FUNDING OF VITAL BASIC PROGRAMS AND SERVICES:** 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 the many districts that do not have reserve funds on hand 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.) Similarly, the Community Schools construct has the potential to reinvigorate rural communities, but the state has not provided sufficient funding to initiate this critically important and effective program.