



THE LONG ROAD HOME

TESTIMONY

BEFORE THE NEW YORK STATE

JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET COMMITTEE

ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION HEARING

FEBRUARY 6, 2019

LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING

ALBANY, NEW YORK

Testimony presented by

David A. Little, Esq.

RSANYS Executive Director

Dal295@cornell.edu. (518) 888-4598



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A photograph of a person walking away from the camera on a paved road. The road is painted with the words 'THE LONG ROAD HOME' in large, white, 3D-style letters. The scene is set in a rural landscape during sunset or sunrise, with a person walking on the left side of the road. The sky is a mix of orange and yellow, and there are trees with autumn foliage on the right side of the road. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

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DEAR STATE LEADERS:

While the rest of our state grows, the population of our rural areas swiftly dwindles. Businesses, services and families have all left our state seeking a better life. The fact that people now engage in an exodus from our state, rather than seek it out in order to prosper is anathema to our history and our credo. **Rural residents who remain are doing the hard work of staying. Why are they being ignored?**

In recent years, you have made public education a priority and we truly appreciate your support. Sadly, there are those who would retreat from that progress this coming year. The Executive Budget would not only have detrimental consequences to the education of our state's children, it would establish harmful, far reaching precedents. Because it offers an amount insufficient to even maintain existing programs and services, all schools would suffer, but none more than our rural schools. Here's why:

Generally speaking, New York State

1. **Provides after school programs** and other out of classroom learning opportunities for its students...**but not for rural children.** Lack of transportation aid and the need for local communities to pay costs up front (and await state reimbursement) make them inaccessible to rural schools and their students.
2. **Provides preschool** and its learning advantages...**but not for rural children** (for the same reasons listed above.)
3. **Provides a broad curriculum** that allows students to be competitive in college and in the workplace...**but not for rural children.** Lack of local funding forces rural schools to stick to the state mandated curriculum-and only the state mandated curriculum. That hurts rural children who want to attend college or compete in the workplace.
4. **Provides Community Schools** and support services like adequate guidance, psychologists, internships, extracurricular activity transportation and broadband access to support digital learning...**but not for rural children.** Community schools may well be the salvation of rural education, but so far, the state isn't investing in a way in which rural schools can participate.
5. **Provides sufficient certified teachers** in all subject areas, ensuring high quality educational programming...**but not for rural children.** Our rural schools are experiencing a teacher shortage-both in initially recruiting qualified teachers and in retaining them.
6. Assesses the ability of a community to contribute to the education of its children and then **provides sufficient aid** to ensure a sound, basic education for every student...**but not for rural children.** Under the current state aid distribution scheme, many rural schools are much more impoverished in reality than is recognized by the state. The Great Recession destroyed the rural economy, a fact that hasn't yet been recognized in compensating state aid.

The list goes on...

Generally speaking, New York State's rural schools

1. **Raise virtually no local revenue under the tax levy cap.** They have little local tax base and the cap percentage is too low to allow local revenue to sustain the educational needs of children. Rural residents couldn't afford significant increases even if their schools were allowed a higher levy increase.
2. **Have not recovered from years of lost aid.** Consequently, while their graduation rates are admirably high, the education they are able to provide does not ensure that their students are competitive in either college or the workplace.

3. **Are masters of innovation.** Using shared services in higher percentages than any other entity anywhere, our rural schools lead our state in overcoming severe fiscal constraints by partnering with neighboring districts, BOCES, local businesses and community colleges in an attempt to combat severe underfunding. Even when applying this skill so broadly, our rural schools struggle. We cannot expect them to do even more of this to get by when businesses have closed, employment and population have plummeted and the state aid proposed for this year wouldn't even maintain existing programs.

4. **Are embroiled in a volatile social environment.** Higher unemployment, loss of tax base and population, lack of local health care facilities, the impact of the opioid epidemic, unmet mental health and other social needs all combine to make rural residents in general and rural students in particular feel isolated and abandoned by their state and federal governments. They want to grow up and remain in their home communities, but they are being forced out in record numbers. **Rural New York was once able to bail out its metropolitan sisters. Now it cannot sustain itself and is looking for the same kind of assistance previously provided to other New Yorkers in similarly dire need.**

– WHAT WOULD HELP? –

SUFFICIENT STATE AID: For rural schools to begin to gain ground in meeting the educational needs of its children, the state needs to provide an additional \$2 billion in aid to public education, focusing on districts with high rates of students in poverty, high numbers of English Language Learners and narrow curricula that do not provide a competitive education. After setting aside reimbursable aids that largely go to high wealth districts that can afford to expend funds, paying for existing and necessary programs and services, setting aside hundreds of millions for specific new state initiatives and dividing state aid by regional "shares", there has traditionally been little ability to address the severe and unique needs of our rural schools. This practice cannot continue if New York State is to sustain itself economically, socially or politically.

A LEGITIMATE FORMULA: The Executive Budget proposes nothing to update or improve the now long outdated education aid formula. In addition to a sufficient allocation of state aid, this year's State Budget must include a new, transparent, sustainable, predictable, but most critically, workable Foundation Aid Formula. New York State has done everything with its Foundation Aid Formula except to legitimately use it. We can no longer afford to freeze, ignore, cut or bastardize this formula. It must be updated to recognize changes in community and student poverty, increases in student needs such as language, transience, health and substance abuse issues. In short, it must accurately gauge a community's ability to contribute to the education of its children and then provide the remainder of aid needed to support the education of those children.

IMPROVING THE LOCAL PROPERTY TAX LEVY CAP: State leaders have urged making the cap on local property tax levies permanent. If that's the case, then we must remove inequities in the current cap. For instance, no school district should ever face a negative tax cap and the cap should actually be a 2% cap (as advertised) and not the negligible increase that the consumer inflation rate has allowed in recent years. Rural school districts don't raise enough under the current structure to provide for their students. The "cap" should be on the local school budget itself, not on the tax levy to avoid further inequities in providing educational resources for our children.

DEVELOPING FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR RURAL COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: The Community Schools model takes advantage of the available space created by Excel Aid funding and the loss of student enrollment. School space should be further maximized to provide afterschool, weekend and summer programming. Other uses might include mental, physical health care, dental or vision programs for either students or the community. Rural schools have two primary assets: Caring people and space. The Community Schools Model makes use of these assets to provide a better future for rural children and their families. Funds for community schools should not compete with other vital, flexible school funding.

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.)

FOCUSING STATE ATTENTION ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE ISSUES: The annual NYSCOSS survey of superintendents identified student mental health as their most pressing issue. 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 in search of work are creating a "Grapes of Wrath" like scenario for rural children. **IN NEW YORK STATE!** At the very least, increased mental health services are needed to help them cope with circumstances we find hard to envision.

IMPROVING STATE SUPPORT FOR RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: Unlike New York's cities and suburbs, our rural areas remain in the throes of economic malaise. We have lost jobs and population in record numbers. At present there does not appear to be a comprehensive state plan to address this crisis. Without a significant state investment in rural economic development, we cannot adequately support our rural schools and rural students have no opportunity to remain in their home communities upon graduation, leading to an economic desert that will pose a dramatic burden on our state.

– HELPFUL EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSALS –

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: A wonderful program-truly game changing if done on a large scale in rural districts. When the funds "set aside" to do Community Schools come from the education aid total, it gives the appearance of detracting from the basic aid all schools need. The solution is to increase Foundation Aid and then use Community Schools to open a whole new world for students in rural areas.

PRE-KINDERGARTEN: This is the most disappointing aspect of the Executive Budget. Pre-school is the answer to the cognitive learning deficiencies experienced by so many of our students living in poverty. A less than inflationary increase statewide for existing programs is certainly also insufficient to expand pre-k where it is needed most. Pre-school must be expanded, transportation aid for pre-school must be included if New York State is to thrive: Pure and simple. This amount indicates that the governor needs to be made aware of the life changing nature of pre-school educational outcomes for high need students.

ADVANCED PLACEMENT TEST ASSISTANCE: The Executive Budget provides a modest increase to fund AP exam costs for low-income students. This funding will provide further access to advanced coursework for low-income students, and will promote educational equity across the State. Rural schools support the expansion of this program.

FARM TO SCHOOL: The Executive budget's Farm to School initiative helps rural student nutrition, develops markets for agriculture and has the potential to help rural school food service programs keep their financial heads above water. Providing funds for equipment recognizes a real need. This is an exciting and much needed program.

AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS: The proposed state budget offers \$10 million more for after school programming. This could be big for financially challenged schools, as well as addressing serious learning and social issues for teens, but so far the program has focused almost entirely on urban programming.

WE TEACH NY: This program attempts to address the teacher shortage by providing \$3 million worth of stipends to prospective teachers willing to work in hard to staff schools. The program would guarantee a job when completed. The problem? Again, it only applies to prospective teachers of color, ignoring the severe problem of finding qualified teachers outside of urban areas. This program in particular shows an urban-centric focus of our government; a focus that will ultimately erode our state's position of prominence.

– WHAT WOULD HURT? –

SHIFTING THE SCHOOL FUNDING FOCUS: With state residents clamoring for a legitimate school aid increase and an equitable means of distributing that aid, the governor has chosen to deflect our attention to distribution of aid to individual schools within each school district. He says the annual attempt to obtain more aid is a "scam". He says the real problem isn't the billions owed by the state to schools, it's the fact that school districts don't give each individual school the same amount of money. He says school districts get enough money, but they choose to shortchange some of their schools by providing too much to others. Why is this illogical? Let's count the ways! First, this state has hundreds of school districts with only one school at each level. His argument doesn't apply to them-or shouldn't. Yet, he wants to expand his funding transparency requirements to nearly half of the school districts in the state. He wants to shift the argument away from how much the district is provided and instead have the state tell the district how much should be spent in each building. Talk about loss of local control! Schools will be forced to submit their budget proposals for review. They'll have to pass state muster before they even get to the voters. (Those same voters who are expected to shoulder the lion's share of the cost increases under the plan.) The Executive Budget ignores school district realities like inability to alter contractual obligations (again, because of the state's Triborough Amendment) heating and cooling costs that vary between buildings, the extracurricular sports and activities that make high school more expensive to provide than elementary school by its very nature, transportation variations that can swing widely due to the location of out of district special ed programs, not to mention the fact that (especially with enrollment swings) a district can simply have more kids at the elementary, middle or high school level than at the others. The plan may in fact have some relevance in large city school districts where resources can be distributed between several schools at the same level-but certainly not in our rural schools. What he really appears to want to address is shorting schools in poor areas of a school district, while schools in wealthy areas within the same district get the works. However, this plan is either wildly ignorant of how most school districts operate or it is a deliberate attempt to take focus off of the real issue of what is perennially regarded as the nation's worst education aid distribution system.

CAPPING REIMBURSABLE AIDS: State aid reimbursement for school construction, transportation of students and participation in BOCES programs is a promise that must be honored. Local taxpayers have already spent their money with the promise of state reimbursement in the following year. Schools build their financial plan on that promise. The thought of capping both local revenue and state reimbursement at 2% is a blueprint for the dismantling of our state's public educational system. The proposal provides a disincentive for schools to send their students to important career and technical programs at BOCES. Our leaders cannot simultaneously call for increased shared services and take away the means to do it. The same can be said for transporting students and building needed school facilities. This proposal is an attack on local taxpayers and the students they support.

SHIFTING THE COST OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SUMMER PROGRAMS TO LOCAL TAXPAYERS: The Executive Budget calls for the deterioration or even dismantling of a vital service provided to our most vulnerable children. Summer programming prevents the loss of learning for those children who work the hardest to make academic gains. Cutting summer school special ed funding forces school districts to scale back on these critically important programs. It forces schools to make the Hobson's Choice of whether to cut programs for the general school population or special education students. New York State should not become noted for creating class distinctions between our children.

NO STUDENT GOES HUNGRY. GREAT IDEA - BAD PROPOSAL: The planned budget attempts to do the right thing by ensuring that no student goes hungry in school. It goes about it the wrong way. It uses the state budget to enact a law banning what it terms "lunch shaming practices" by mandating that schools provide the same lunch to all students whether they can pay for it or not. It provides no new funding whatever to pay for this and adds new reporting requirements, like a plan to notify parents of low meal account balances, communication procedures to support their enrollment in free and reduced price lunches and an explanation of the school's unpaid meal policies. In addition, if a school has 70 % of its students qualifying for free and reduced price lunches, it would be mandated to provide breakfast during the school day. There is a small increase in aid for schools to make the transition to providing more student meals after the bell.

STRANDED, STARVING...IGNORED?

Year after year goes by and yet another state spending proposal fails to provide the leadership of restarting a workable, equitable and realistic state aid formula for our schools; as well as underfunding the current outdated formula. The result is that our neediest schools continue to receive less than they should from the state, while also being severely limited in their ability to raise local revenue. **The state's failure is reprehensible, allowing children to be relegated to a lifetime of economic struggle, simply because they come from a rural community.** We need a formula that accurately reflects the amount a community can afford to contribute and base state aid on that amount; not on what it used to get, not on how politically important the community is or isn't, but on the difference between what a community can pay and what the court has said constitutes a sound basic education for children. Its tough work, but New York State has smart and dedicated leaders. Don't allow the Executive Budget to once again ignore this difficult, but vital work.

The problem of adequately and appropriately funding our schools is not insurmountable. The difference between what has been proposed and what is needed is a few hundred million dollars. Tough, but not impossible to achieve in an era of economic growth. Taken in total, the Executive Budget is a starting point for serious deliberations. Rural schools make up nearly half of all districts in the state. How they fare in the state budgeting process will largely be up to the willingness of its state leaders to fight for all of the children in our state. How we treat our rural schools and rural communities will define New York State's future. On behalf of those districts, the job of the Rural Schools Association will be to provide you the information you need to assess the ramifications of proposals, reactions and compromises. We stand with you in the effort to address serious issues affecting public education. Only legislative action can avert a return to cuts in programs and services. Thank you for your kind assistance in this vital effort.

Respectfully submitted,

David A. Little, Esq.

Executive Director

