



RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION  
— OF NEW YORK STATE —



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**2025  
LEGISLATIVE  
PRIORITIES**

## RSA LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES AN INTRODUCTION

New York State is becoming widely recognized as leading the nation in implementing the Portrait of a Graduate program on a statewide level. While many states adhere to the tenets of the program that values the individualized needs of students, no other state outside of New York has arrived at a way to implement it.

While New York State will likely never be the cheapest state in which to operate, or the one where business finds the least restrictive environment, with its latest changes to graduation pathways and instruction it can provide business with the workforce it claims is unobtainable: one with sound technical skills, soft skills and the desire to work effectively.

Whether our state will derail this revolutionary effort by creating an insufficient or disconnected funding source will determine our state's financial future. These legislative priorities must be addressed to ensure that productive future.

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## FUNDING



The Rockefeller Institute is poised to make significant revisions to the state's education Foundation Aid formula and related funding streams.

To date, the institute has indicated that while they will not recommend wholesale changes (preferring in their brief window to focus on updates to categories), they will nonetheless tackle such fundamental areas as Save Harmless, the regional cost index, special education, census data, the annual inflationary adjustment and others.

The totality of their recommendations (if accepted by the governor and legislature in the state budget) will have a significant impact on rural school districts. The institute has suggested that ramifications will be mitigated by a phase in of revisions to allow districts to adjust to their new status.

This telegraphs an anticipation of aid reductions. State leaders will need to be vigilant and vocal in advocating for either the rejection of revisions, adjustments or at least the understanding of the role and additional challenges of rural districts (including an adjusted sparsity factor.)

## GRADUATION PATHWAYS, ASSESSMENTS AND INSTRUCTION



The Board of Regents has proposed significant and long awaited revisions to the state's graduation requirements, methods of assessing mastery and the role of local school districts in determining the needs of its students. The effort is based on a concept long supported by RSA; Portrait of a Graduate.

Among the proposed changes are individual district plans for students' pathways to graduation, elimination of the Regents Examinations as the only assessment of mastery and the inclusion of additional assessing tools such as portfolios and external experience.

These concepts reflect the philosophy of rural school districts already attuned to individualized student needs. RSA is prepared to assist, guide and support SED in this effort, including attempts by the state to reduce state aid needed to implement this groundbreaking effort to tailor education to a new generation's needs.

## STUDENT HEALTH AND SAFETY



RSA must work with school and state leaders to help bridge collaboration between stakeholders at the state and local levels. Emerging from the pandemic and affected by the proliferation of school shootings, this generation is being challenged like no other.

Among the state's funding priorities and formulaic revisions must be the recognition of local district need to protect, treat and support its children in the face of such significant trauma. "School" is not as we remember it and childhood concerns are far more pervasive than we as a generation encountered.

Pandemic induced isolation and fear of death while in school are daily concerns that must be addressed if this generation is to learn effectively. We have a unique opportunity to include these concerns in the state's intended revision of its funding. We also have the responsibility to work with state regulators to merge instruction, treatment and protection into every aspect of school life.





## REGIONALIZATION



Neighbors helping neighbors is a way of life in rural New York. Our rural schools have long relied on regional collaboration to provide educational opportunities to their students. BOCES, work-alike groups between districts, shared athletic teams, as well as actual mergers, consolidations have long been components of the rural schools' attempts to expand programming for children. More is needed and the State Education Department has called for local discussions and ideas of how to maximize collaborative efforts across regions. These discussions will need to be melded into state fiscal negotiations and form a continuum of models for regional sharing of programs and services.

Models of shared services beyond traditional mergers and BOCES programs should also be incentivized when they arise organically from locally identified needs. Such changes must remain at the discretion of the local community and their expectations and dreams for their children. Recent state policy reflects the understanding that local school districts best know the needs of their students and the state must facilitate opportunities rather than mandate structure. There is a fine line between sharing your strengths and receiving help with your needs—and diminishing the tremendous role our rural schools play in the life of their communities. The state is right in relying on local discussions and local discretion as it navigates a path to better educating the third of New York's students in rural schools.

## ZERO-EMISSION BUSES



Rather than working with industry to develop zero emission buses that meet the practical requirements of schools, the state has simply mandated their purchase. Questions abound, including the ability to operate at sufficient distances to make rural “runs”, the ability of power companies to supply sufficient power and the extreme cost not only of the vehicles but the infrastructure to transmit power from “the grid” to the school charging stations.

One district was recently informed that in order to secure sufficient power, the district would need to construct a \$50 million power transfer station. In addition, the state has failed to reconcile conflicting legal requirements that voters approve such purchases with the mandate that districts use only the much more expensive vehicles. Further compounding the conundrum is the fact that hydrogen fuel cell vehicles show the promise of greater range and a dramatically quicker and lower cost charging process.

The possibility of school districts spending millions on electric buses and then discovering that fuel cell buses are cheaper and more efficient exists. New York State must either adjust the timeline for compliance or identify a funding source. Local school districts must not be placed in the position of dismantling educational programming merely to comply with this state directive.

## STATE MANDATES



The State Education Department has of late offered a collaborative, rather than a regulatory approach to its relationship with school districts. However, the same can’t be said for the executive and legislative branches.

Each year, state leaders propose dozens of new mandates on our schools. A recent example of an enacted mandate is the requirement to include students on local boards of education.

The state seems to shield itself from criticism by holding up the value of “local control” when it suits its purpose but overriding that concept when it sees overarching public policy or political benefits. The cumulative impact of such mandates is seldom evaluated, as each individual issue builds on others to create a challenging morass of rules and regulations that are often at odds.

For example, the state now requires the purchase of zero emission buses at tremendous cost. It also requires local support of school budgets and imposes a cap on the tax levy. It does not explain how districts should comply with both the purchasing and local voting requirements when the public rejects such purchases.

## TECHNOLOGY NEEDS & THREATS



Today's technology is truly a double edged sword. On one hand, instruction and assessing in this generation are reliant on up to date infrastructure and access to devices and services across the economic spectrum. The potential for artificial intelligence to diminish the workload of overburdened educators and administrators is encouraging.

On the other hand, social media bullying, violent threats to schools, and the inappropriate use of artificial intelligence in schoolwork all pose new and daunting policy challenges for our state. Rapid technological development demands an ability to instruct students on appropriate use and assuring media and digital literacy.

Each of the issues inherent in our development and use of technology has unique implications for our rural schools and their communities. Assuring that these unique concerns are included in the evolving state approach is vital to the success of students and rural communities alike.



## ADDITIONAL CONCERNS



**A. Rural Staff Recruitment and Retention:** Obtaining school staff in the post pandemic, financially volatile, increasingly threatened school environment is pervasive but particularly problematic in our rural schools.

Fewer applicants coming from teaching programs, lower (noncompetitive) salaries, lack of affordable housing, inability to offer collegial mentoring and support all challenge our rural school districts to compete for a diminished workforce. Our state is currently far behind sister states in addressing the crisis with innovative strategies. It's past time for New York to assure our rural schools are adequately staffed.

**B. Transition from Rural School to College:** The lack of transition coursework that is regularly offered to suburban and urban students is unaffordable in many rural districts. The result is a need for remediation in college, where students pay for these courses themselves and are prevented from beginning work on their chosen area of study.

This, combined with lack of assistance with financial aid, travel challenges to and from campus and other issues leave rural students frustrated in their post secondary efforts. For the state to uphold its constitutional obligation of providing each child an education, it must include higher level, transition-focused coursework in its rural schools (paying for it where needed.)

**C. Student-Career Connections:** New York State needs to incorporate frequent, immersive career exposure in the early grades if it is to allow the development of skills needed to later perform a chosen career. The foundation is in place with secondary programs and the advent of remote learning opportunities and the development of regionalized programs.

This should afford the state the means to successfully incorporate career connections at an early age. Financial and structural barriers must be removed and the state must use its excellent system of local community colleges and universities, as well as BOCES to build out the natural link between learning and a resulting career.

Businesses are clamoring for employees with the requisite skill to perform well. "Growing our own" is crucial to the future of rural communities and planning for career opportunities is intrinsic to that effort.



*Thank you for your continued  
support of rural schools!*



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