



TESTIMONY

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JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET COMMITTEE

ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION HEARING

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LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING

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Testimony presented by

David A. Little, Esq.

RSANYS Executive Director

Da1295@cornell.edu. (518) 888-4598

Members of the Joint Committee, rural New York continues to experience what the U.S. Census Bureau calls the “largest outmigration of any state in the nation.” Last month, the Census Bureau publicized our state’s loss of 1.4 million New Yorkers in the last decade. This cataclysmic population decline has occurred despite population growth in New York City and stability in our upstate urban areas and suburbs. Simply put, rural New York has been losing population at a precipitous rate for a decade and with little (if any) exception, there has been and continues to be no attempt by our state leaders to help.

There is no comprehensive economic development plan. There are no incentives to locate in rural New York, few (if any) attempts to retain our fellow state residents. Indeed, our state leaders seem to either be ignorant of the problem altogether, or unwilling to address it for fear of identifying a problem in need of such a monumental ameliorative effort. Our governor himself has attempted to oversimplify the issue by claiming that our older residents are simply seeking warmer climes. No such luck. The Census Bureau indicates that our residents are seeking out our neighboring states in an attempt at a better economic position in life. Obviously, the concept of The Family of New York fleeing The Empire State in search of a better life is anathema to our shared philosophy and our crede. But that is exactly what is happening in rural New York State, exactly what has been happening for the past ten years without a state response, without significant efforts to reverse this destructive trend.

Nowhere is the state’s negligence in addressing this crisis more apparent than in its approach to rural public education.

- Rural New York has become exponentially more impoverished, without a state response.
- Businesses have exited our rural communities, leaving fewer and fewer to pay more and more of the share of school funding, with no state response.
- What few rural immigrants there are have largely been English Language Learners who have greater educational needs, with no state response.
- Our rural schools are incapable of attracting and retaining the educators required to ensure the state’s constitutional responsibility of providing a sound, basic education to its children, with no state response.
- While rural schools graduate most of their students, they are statistically unsuccessful in obtaining even a two year degree. This results from a lack of counselors and the need to take personally costly remedial coursework to compensate for the lack of a sufficient secondary curriculum; with no state response.
- Our neighboring states have proven for two generations that the way to provide the broad curriculum needed for rural students to be competitive in college and career opportunities is to maintain community based elementary and middle schools and to then have secondary students attend a regional high school, where shared resources can be focused on providing the Advanced Placement courses, the Dual Enrollment programs and the International Baccalaureate coursework that allows students to put college level material into a usable context upon arrival at an institution of higher learning. We have known this for decades and the breadth of curriculum in rural high schools has declined with the lack of equitable funding for the past decade, all with no state response.
- Access to broadband internet services is critically important to both rural economic viability and rural educational opportunity. If rural students don’t have access to the same information and learning experiences, they simply can’t compete. Our state knows

it and yet has fostered a hodge-podge of private providers to flounder. Indeed, the state is seeking to prevent perhaps the most viable attempt to provide comprehensive broadband access, out of a fear that it will stifle nonexistent competition. Again, no state response.

There can be no better example of either our state leaders' lack of awareness of this pervasive and destructive situation in rural New York, or their willingness to engage in benign neglect than is manifested in the Executive Budget proposal before you. With a local tax levy cap at lower than 2%, the governor has proposed an education aid increase of roughly half of that needed to merely maintain existing programs and services in our schools. Last year our rural school districts did two things in response to school aid that were outside the norm: First, they taxed at half the collective rate of all of the state's other school districts. Why would they do that when they are hurting so badly for staff to provide needed curriculum and address significant and increasing students physical and mental health needs? Simple. There are so few businesses and fellow residents that the school literally can't afford to drive out the rest. So, they took the second nonconforming action: They used their fiscal reserves at twice the rate of all other school districts. The combination was necessary to support their communities and their students, but it is a recipe for long term financial disaster. School districts are allowed to keep only minimal reserves on hand because the state (acting on its constitutional duty) serves as a fiscal guarantor. When local finances are insufficient to provide a sound, basic education, the state must provide the needed funding. It has not and in this proposed state budget, it does not.

Lest you think that our rural schools are only a microcosm of the state's approach to all of its schools, please allow me to focus on just a few of the Executive Budget policy and funding changes.

- The Early College program is specifically targeted only to schools with a low graduation rate, specifically excluding high need rural schools (that despite the odds, graduate the majority of their students; albeit often with a minimal, state mandated curriculum.)
- The After School program is specifically targeted to areas experiencing gang activity: In other words, non-rural areas.
- Future building projects will receive less state aid, harming rural districts that have little remaining tax base to fund such projects.
- Transportation aid, which is the lifeblood of rural education is slated to be capped and the existing aid ratio option eliminated.
- BOCES aid, which supports the very shared services demanded by the governor and most needed by rural school districts who cannot afford to provide their own programs, is consolidated with other necessary aid categories (and thus, becomes an uncertain and unreliable revenue stream which rural schools will not be able to access.)
- The segment of public education that is best supported in the Executive Budget is that provided by charter schools in urban areas. They are set to receive twice the increase of traditional public schools. Rural areas do not currently have charter schools.
- Despite the universally accepted fact that pre-k is our most effective (and cost effective) means of addressing the effects of poverty, learning deficiencies, social retardation, mental health issues and the full gamut of pervasive concerns facing the children of our rural communities, the state has chosen to support pre-k in our urban areas to a far greater extent than in our rural communities. The state demands that pre-k programs be paid for "up front" with local funds before seeking state reimbursement in a subsequent year. The

state refuses to pay for pre-k transportation, precluding rural participation (given the geographic realities of distance between home and school.)

- The Executive Budget does away with the state's share of Committee on Special Education placement costs, as well as its support of the state residential facilities for blind and deaf students. In rural areas, this cost shift puts special educational students in direct competition with the general education population for dwindling resources.

The majority of the Executive Budget funding proposals hurt the very school districts the governor claims need the most help. Yes, most of the "new money" would go to high need school districts but what is unsaid is that New York City qualifies as a high need district and alone would receive half of that increase. If we are to raise the schools at the bottom, then surely the idea of cutting aid, capping aid and shifting costs onto those districts is counterintuitive at best. At its worst, it needlessly disrupts and harms the lives and the future of our children.

The list of specific proposals goes on, but all of them point to a state approach that a decade ago could have been called merely ignorant of the impact of policy on rural education. Lack of familiarity apparently breeds neglect. 10 years of a steadily declining economic and population picture, without any state response however, leaves one with the inevitable conclusion that the neglect is intentional. There are consequences to such a coldhearted approach. First, the Grapes of Wrath-like exodus will continue as those few remaining residents shoulder an increasing share of the financial burden of operating municipal and educational institutions. Unlike other states during the Great Recession, rural residents did not simply move to populated areas of their own state. They left the state completely. Secondly, unlike the late 1970s and early 1980s, when New York City experienced severe fiscal distress, rural New York State will be unable to respond with aid whenever the next economic downturn affects New York City's current high level of economic productivity. Simply put, it's time for New York City to return the favor and provide rural New York with the economic stimulus it needs-every bit as much as the City needed it a generation ago.

In his budget address, the governor raised his voice to three times demand "We must raise those schools at the bottom!" Sadly, his only attempt to do so in the Executive Budget appears to be the timeworn plan to require multi-school districts to declare which school gets the most money. The plan itself reveals the governor's lack of understanding of the rural condition. Rural school districts most often only have one building at each level and often all three are housed in one facility. Forcing them to ascertain and report this information is of no use whatever in raising them from the bottom. Worse, it belies even the most cursory understanding of their needs. There is good news. The state's fiscal plan itself already calls for a \$1.1 billion school aid increase. You, our legislative representatives have the ability to prevent this harm and to put our rural communities back on the road to economic sustainability-and our children back on their way to the kind of future that all New Yorkers deserve. You can reject the consolidation of aid categories. You can support the ability to apply for special educational waivers when meeting federal requirements. Recognizing that our school aid formula is outdated, inadequate and unused by over half of our school districts (and manipulated beyond legitimacy) you can update the school aid funding formula to accurately gauge what a community can afford to spend toward the education of its children and have the state uphold its constitutional obligation to make up the difference. You can adjust the formula so that districts can no longer be twice as poor as that formula recognizes. You can adjust it to account for the increased costs of meeting

the educational needs of English Language Learners. You can support rural broadband internet access. You can provide transportation aid for pre-k to make it truly universal in more than name.

You have begun the hard work of exploring school aid funding reform. For thousands of our state's children, there's not a minute to lose. Please take the opportunity of these state budget negotiations to react to the crisis happening in our rural communities. Help ensure the long term viability of our precious State of New York by preventing the virtual exclusion of our rural areas. Do not allow history to repeat, as the next time we are faced with a general economic decline, we will all surely lose, irrespective of our location within the state.

Our rural schools are fighting the state's neglect with innovation, determination and their undying sense of mutual community support. They are using partners wherever they can find them, working with educational sources both real and virtual. They are good stewards of both resources and their charges. Please come to their rescue before the crisis expands to the remainder of our great state.

Thank you for your kind attention and for your concern.

Respectfully submitted,

David A. Little, Esq., Executive Director