

# FORGOTTEN FAMILY MEMBER

NEW YORK STATE'S NEGLECT OF ITS RURAL RESIDENTS





# THE CRISIS:

New York State's leaders often refer to the "Family of New York" when seeking to address social needs. However, a demographically significant and geographically huge portion of the state's residents are being systematically neglected by the state. In fact, for New York State's rural communities and the schools they support, New York State has fostered a Grapes of Wrath-like decline allowing New York to deteriorate from a historic beacon of opportunity to a bastion of despair. According to the U.S. Census (as reported in *USA Today*) the State of New York has lost nearly 1.5 million residents over the

past decade. This exodus occurred despite population growth in New York City and steady population figures in the New York City suburban counties and upstate cities. This historic population exodus is second in magnitude to only the Dust Bowl migration of the Great Depression in United States history. Forty years ago, New York State had over 17 million acres in agricultural production; today that figure is 7 million acres. The entire upstate economy amounts to under 17% of the state's total economy. Yet almost nothing has been said or written about the crisis. State leaders (in particular) have been loath to acknowledge the phenomenon.



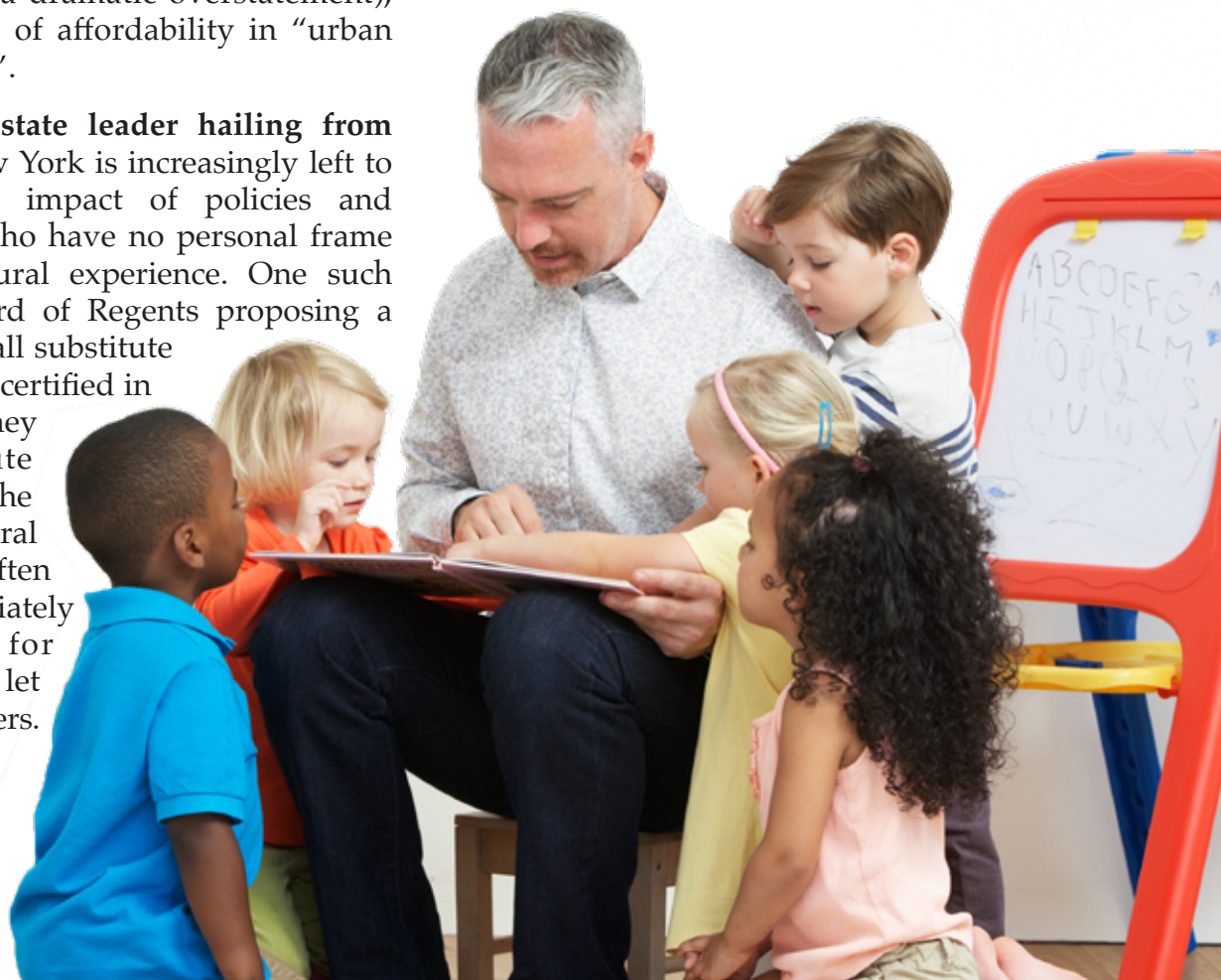
**For instance**, in one of very few comments on the subject, New York's Governor Cuomo attributed the emigration simply to New Yorkers getting older and wanting to move to sunnier climes. State economic officials, as well as legislators (perhaps wanting to avoid exacerbating the problem by publicizing the job and population loss to potential new businesses) have been virtually silent. The state itself has offered no coordinated economic development plan and in large measure has ignored rural New York's economic woes altogether.

**As an example**, in January of 2021 the governor gave a series of State of the State addresses, laying out his vision of the state's recovery from the recession created by the COVID pandemic. In hours of presentations over several days, the only mention of rural economic needs was in reference to constructing power transmission lines and a solar farm in order to bring low cost Canadian hydropower and solar power to New York City. Similarly, the devastating impact of the lack of broadband internet access in rural New York State (with the resulting educational loss during the pandemic and the inability to attract business despite the national trend of business leaving urban areas) was misunderstood by state leaders, who stated that there was 98% broadband coverage in the state (a dramatic overstatement), leaving only the issue of affordability in "urban minority communities".

**With every relevant state leader hailing from urban areas**, rural New York is increasingly left to explain the potential impact of policies and programs to leaders who have no personal frame of reference to the rural experience. One such example was the Board of Regents proposing a new requirement that all substitute teachers in the state be certified in the subject in which they would be substitute teaching; ignoring the glaring reality that in rural communities, schools often cannot find appropriately certified teachers for permanent positions, let alone substitute teachers.

A second is the state's practice of requiring local districts to fund the initial costs of starting a pre-kindergarten program, then waiting for the state to provide reimbursement. Most rural school districts don't have the revenue on hand to follow this format. A simple change to the system would allow many more pre-k programs in rural areas without the state paying any more than the current system (it's just a matter of understanding the way the policy operates in rural communities as a practical matter.)

**Simply put, New York State leaders have never experienced rural realities** and regularly either ignore them or choose to prioritize programs and services in more highly populated areas. The most recent example can be seen in what many have deemed the state's "historic" intent to fully fund the operating portion of education aid known as Foundation Aid. While perhaps well intentioned, the practical implication of that effort diverts the majority of state funding to well off, highly populated school districts, while small rural schools that have been devastated by the loss of local tax base are provided only a minimal inflationary increase. Making matters worse, once the decennial U.S. census documents the rural population loss, rural New York State will experience a concomitant decline in political representation at both the state and federal levels.





## THE STUDY:

In an effort to accurately identify the challenges and needs of New York State's rural schools and the communities that support them, the Rural Schools Association of New York State hosted a series of 8 public forums across the state. Additionally, a national forum of rural school leaders was conducted in Philadelphia in conjunction with the National School Boards Association. The meetings gathered not

only school officials but community leaders, business members, state and federal legislative representatives, higher learning instructors and administrators, parents of students, taxpayers and local and regional service providers. It was intended to be as far reaching an assessment of rural issues as possible. The forums were widely covered by both regional and statewide media.



# THE CHALLENGES:

Here is a list of the **top ten challenges** facing rural New York, as described by participants at the statewide rural issues forums, as well as suggested ways to help:



**10. LAYERING ON OF NEW MANDATES:** New York State's legislative and regulatory processes vigorously address recognized needs. New laws and regulations are imposed each year. Sadly, there is rarely if ever any thought given to the cumulative impact of years of these state mandates. Seldom do state leaders repeal laws or regulations when new ones are added. After generations of this approach, public education in our state has become a cacophony of disparate layers of competing rules. Reporting and procedural requirements place severe financial and time constraints on fiscally struggling rural schools, where staff frequently perform multiple functions in order to operate.



**9. LACK OF EARLY AGE READINESS TO LEARN:** Lack of employment in rural New York and the nature of migratory agricultural employment has led to increased poverty. The mass exodus out of rural areas of our state has destabilized families who remain, leaving many children, isolated, vulnerable and unready to learn when they start school. When they arrive, they come with language and socialization deficits. The ability of rural schools to host high quality pre-school programs is hampered by the state's approach to pupil transportation and by its demand that local school districts must pay for the first year of operation and then await partial reimbursement by the state. Our rural schools simply don't have the funds to "front" the state's goal of "universal pre-k."



**8. NO STATE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN:** Not only is there no comprehensive approach to stimulating the rural economy of New York State, there is little to no recognition that there is one. The total upstate economy currently amounts to a lower percentage of the state's economy than the contributions of out of state residents who claim income from our state (specifically, under 17% of the total state economy.) In prior generations, the upstate economy was robust and able to support New York City in its economic crisis of the 1970s. Now, absent the push for casinos, there is little discussion of rural economic development and no current proposals for its improvement. Recent references to our rural areas have been as mere hosts for power production and transmission lines to transport low cost power to New York City. As such, rural graduates are leaving our state in droves. There are simply no jobs at home and they rightly foresee no change to that in the immediate future.



## 7. NEED FOR FLEXIBILITY IN LAWS AND REGULATIONS:

Rules in our state are increasingly promulgated by leaders hailing from high population communities. They simply don't understand or even recognize how their approach might not work in areas with few independent financial and human resources. New Laws and regulations need to include broad discretion in their implementation. Simply put, just state the requirement and leave the "how to" to those at the local level who know their community and their schools best. Rural residents are masterful at accomplishing a great deal with little to work with. They are creative, dedicated and able to implement highly successful programs if given the latitude to work within their limitations. The state needs to create a rural advisory board to provide information on how potential laws and regulations can work in rural areas.



## 6. IMPACT OF ENROLLMENT DECLINE:

Few rural schools have escaped the decreasing number of students in their communities. Job loss has forced families out of our state. Those who remain are under significant stress, decreasing financial resources for rural schools. Under our existing rules, fewer students mean decreased state and federal aid at a time when those children who remain are under severe stress. In our effort to help the large numbers of children in our urban centers, we cannot fail those living in our rural communities. The impact of enrollment decline permeates school and community funding across the full spectrum of the rural community's interaction with government. Continuing to ignore current conditions doesn't make the crisis better. It doesn't even help state officials, as the looming explosion of problems is only exacerbated by procrastination.



## 5. NEED FOR REGIONAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION:

Merger and consolidation of school districts hasn't worked in New York State. Our rules are arcane and too burdensome for even the most school districts to navigate. Fortunately, our state has a proud history of sharing resources. We are in fact the epicenter of shared municipal resources. Our rural schools share with town, village and county governments to maximize the effectiveness of what resources they have. Yet, our state ignores the educational value of regionalism. Our neighboring states have shown for generations that regional high schools can provide the broad curriculum that allows rural students to compete with their suburban peers. Our own experience on Long Island where K-8<sup>th</sup> grade districts feed students into regionalized high schools shows the effectiveness of this approach. In rural areas, young children need to be close to home and communities need the school to be a hub of programs and services. K-8 instruction should continue in existing community school districts, but secondary students should be allowed the benefits of a broad curriculum of advanced placement, career and technical and other coursework necessary for career and post-secondary educational success. Existing high school teachers should be moved to these regional high schools and their areas of instruction broadened to meet current educational demands.





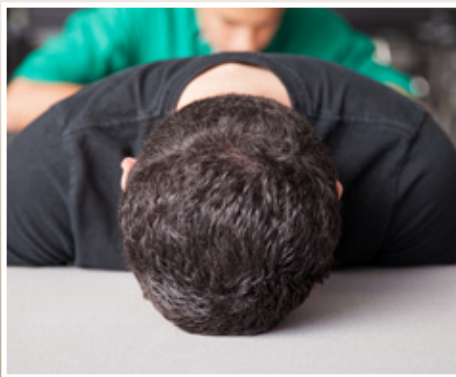
## 4. NEED FOR RURAL BROADBAND INTERNET ACCESS:

If the pandemic proved anything, it is that our rural students, families and businesses suffer from a lack of access to broadband internet. Now that people can and do work from anywhere, our rural communities could thrive once more; if only they offered viable broadband access. Contrary to recent comments by state leaders, universal broadband coverage is a damaging myth pushed by providers who have not lived up to their contractual obligations. (See transcripts of state legislative hearings on the subject.) The state must incentivize and enforce efforts to bring broadband access to our rural communities. It must be treated as any other public utility and approached much like prior generations' efforts to secure rural electrification and landline phone service. Addressing this issue alone could revolutionize life in rural New York State, making rural life a viable choice once again.



## 3. INABILITY TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN SCHOOL STAFF:

Rural schools can't get teachers, bus drivers, administrators or other staff; pure and simple. They can't pay enough to compete with suburban schools, distances to commute are too far when local housing is either unavailable (in needier communities) or unaffordable (in the many rural recreational areas of our state, e.g.. the Finger Lakes, Thousand Islands, Long Island and parts of the Catskills and Adirondacks) and so even those who come initially often leave for more lucrative opportunities once they've gained experience. Our state needs to incentivize people to work in our rural schools by providing student loan forgiveness, low-cost housing, salary supplementation and flexibility in certification.



## 2. LACK OF ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES:

Isolation. Poverty. Distance to providers (requiring time away from work) Opioid and alcohol abuse. Transience and Family Disruption. Sadly this is a snapshot of many areas in post pandemic rural New York; a picture of community increasingly in need of mental health services. Students (children) in particular have been affected by the pandemic. Trauma has played an increasing role in their development, expectations upon return to traditional classroom learning create stress and their family life is strained. Schools have always been a key component of addressing the mental health of children and the state's Community Schools model creates a good structure to expand services for the mental health of children and their families. But models used in areas of high population density don't work in rural communities. Delivery systems that make use of private providers aren't available in rural areas, distance makes getting help burdensome and time consuming. Fortunately, prior state help with building needs and the decline in enrollment have freed up school space. Our state needs to utilize school based health centers to meet the healthcare needs (including mental healthcare needs) of its rural communities.



And the

# Number One Challenge

facing New York State's rural schools is...

## **NEED FOR EDUCATION FUNDING REFORM:**

Increased poverty and the associated needs of children have not been recognized by "fully funding" a formula that is more than a decade old. Funding schools as if they had not experienced the enrollment decline, poverty increases, increased mental and physical health needs, increased transience, lower local tax base, increases in English language learners and a host of other recent changes is creating a rural educational crisis. Recent federal aid provides only stopgap assistance. The state school aid funding formula must be adjusted to account for these changes and provide the resources needed for rural schools to provide the sound, basic education ensured by our state's constitution. Leading up to this year, urban advocates claimed that you needed to fully fund the existing Foundation Aid formula before

you could know whether it needed to be fixed. This year leaders took the first step toward full funding and it became immediately apparent that it needed fixing. For those urban advocates, it drove money to their constituents. It also greatly exacerbated the disparity in funding between our state's haves and have nots. While many of our wealthiest schools saw increases well into the double digits, rural schools saw an across the board increase of only 3% and that's 3% coming off of years of frozen funding, a local tax cap lower than 2 percent and diminished local tax base. Year after year our state aid distribution is annually ranked as the worst in the nation. Now that we're fully funding our formula, shouldn't we do it in a way that helps those who need it most?



For a comprehensive listing of rural challenges and issues identified in the Rural Issues Forums, go to [RSANY.org](http://RSANY.org).