



NEWS FOR NEW YORK STATE'S RURAL SCHOOLS

NOVEMBER 2022 EDITION

RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK STATE



IN A WORD...GRATITUDE

by Executive Director David Little, Esq.



Friends, there's something about facing a lifechanging health event that both gives one pause and creates a deep appreciation for all life has given you. I'll spare you the sordid details but suffice it to say that I ignored a gallbladder infection long enough for it to spread to its neighbors. A couple weeks on dialysis and the prospect of making that a daily lifelong routine and you quickly begin the internal dialogue; "if I only get through this, I'm going to...."

For me that's meant hug your loved ones a little longer, thank the ones who kept things moving forward in your absence and express your gratitude for the ability to do the things you believe are important in your life. The good news is that the kidneys are back in fine working order and the gallbladder that tried to kill me gets its just desserts on the 14th. That leaves me with the welcome task of thanking you for the honor of advancing your interests. It's a good time to do it.

Your RSA has just become independent, after a 45-year financial affiliation with Cornell. In this issue, you'll see how we've taken that opportunity to restructure according to your needs, to become more efficient and more directed at making a difference for you at every level; local district, state and federal. In the stories contained in this issue you'll read about our upcoming legislative priorities; ones you identified as being most important to you. You'll read about our goals, aligned by your RSA Board of Directors to meet your challenges. You'll see the ad inviting you to be at The Gathering in Saratoga Springs; a phenomenal combination of professional development programming, top level state leadership, all combined with Saratoga's Victorian Stroll and the Bills/Patriots game on several large screens. We're doing our best to replicate the Summer Conference at The Otesaga in December in Saratoga.

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The election season has (briefly) taken a hiatus and we've included analysis specific to rural districts. For RSA there's new staff, new connections, and new opportunities...but the same mission of serving rural school districts so that they can provide the best lives for their students. We're glad you're part of the family.

I am personally grateful for your leadership and your unending devotion to the children and school community in your care. It doesn't take a kidney infection; maybe it's the pandemic suspending all that you hold dear, slowing your students' natural educational and social development, maybe it's the loss of economic opportunity or decreased student enrollment but we all have something that makes us fearful for the future. Having gained a new perspective, I would urge us to look past the immediate and toward the important.

As you have in years of underfunding, as you did during the extraordinary demands of the pandemic, you will rise to the challenge of recovering what's been lost and building a better way forward. You are using the chaos to create potential improvements for kids. God bless you for that. Your RSA is focused, resourceful and ready to stand with you every step of the way. See you in Saratoga!

Young Rural Leader And What It Means To Me

by Elianna Tarrants

Hello! My name is Elianna Tarrants. I am currently a senior at Delaware Academy Central School District in Delhi, NY. Delhi is a small town, with a population of about four thousand people. It is located in the Catskills Region of NYS, a mountainous region stretching north of the Hudson Valley, up through upstate New York. Formally known as a predominant farming and agricultural town, Delhi's roots run deep into generational family traditions and community mindedness.



I have lived in Delhi my entire life. I have attended Delaware Academy (DA) for my entire academic career, as DA serves all grades, from kindergarten through twelfth grade with a student population of approximately 800 students. Since my freshman year of high school until now, I have served in various leadership positions at DA. These opportunities have made an everlasting impact on who I have become as an individual, as a student and as a community member.

As my high school years have progressed, I have become involved in many different extracurricular activities. I am currently Vice President of my class and our school's Student Senate. I serve as secretary in our SADD organization and President of Delaware Academy's Honor Society chapter. However, the position that has meant the most to me is President of Delaware Academy's Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter, and District President for New York State FFA's District IV region.

FFA is an agricultural based organization that focuses on creating future leaders and advocates for the future of agriculture on every front, not just on farms themselves. Personally, I do not come from an agricultural background, but I have found my place among the people of FFA, as their values truly encapsulate the passions I strive to emulate.

Becoming a leader has not been a natural or smooth journey for me, nor is it something that I would have ever dreamed of becoming. Though I have participated in extracurricular activities, such as FFA, since sixth grade, it was not until my high school years when I began to discover my potential as a leader, and how serving others in a position of leadership could be a catalyst for positive change within myself.

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I struggled a great deal as a middle school student in social settings. I was quiet, not very good at making friends, and consistently feared any kind of failure. This prevented me from being vulnerable and taking risks, risks that, looking back, had I not taken would not have defined the person that I am today.

As I transitioned into high school, with encouragement from others, I chose to become an FFA officer within my chapter. I desired to invest back into an organization that had invested into me. Unknowingly, a reservoir of motivation and passion had been deposited deep within me by FFA. A dormant fuel that once sparked, ignited an all-consuming fire to serve, educate and explore. It fulfilled me.

I loved serving my chapter, which led to a love of serving my school and greater community. I loved investing in people, especially younger students. When I look back on my younger years, I credit the older students and adults for modeling persistence and love of our organizations. Their selfless approach to mentorship made me realize that I wanted to emulate that same zeal for others. Slowly, I began to join and emerge as a leader in a number of different extracurricular activities, while advancing in rank in my local FFA chapter.

As the years progressed, outlets such as FFA gave me a platform to connect not only with the student body at Delaware Academy, but with my small-town community, region, and state. I have connected with everyone from farmers, to families, to other FFA chapters, local media outlets, parents, teachers, and everyone in between. Most recently, I have witnessed parents, school and FFA alumni, and other community members come together to make one of our FFA chapter's dreams come true. Just last year, after receiving a grant for a new piece of equipment for DA FFA's maple production process, several issues arose that threatened to put the new project in jeopardy.

Amidst the chaos, several community members approached the chapter, offering their expertise, donations and volunteered support. Within the next few months, not only did the project come together, it exceeded expectations; an extra \$15,000 was donated, time-saving equipment was gifted to the chapter, and volunteered skilled labor helped install the project. This project now stands as a permanent structure on our DA campus and is a reflection of the power of vision, collaboration, and community service. It now serves as a learning tool for both my fellow classmates and for the future students of DA. This dream would not have come to fruition without the help of my Delhi community – families, local businesses, agricultural businesses – all united together by the belief that together we can be and do more.

I have grown immensely in the last few years. As I prepare to graduate from high school, and move on to the next chapter of my life, I look back on the opportunities I have had in my rural community. The ability to serve my peers and community has had an enormous impact on defining who I am, and has led me to seek a career in Agricultural Science. I am no longer afraid be vulnerable, question the “status quo” and take risks. I am no longer afraid to speak up and advocate for my beliefs and values. I have seen the beauty in serving others, whether it be my FFA chapter, school, or community, they have changed me for the better. It has become almost effortless for me to serve and grow. These are the qualities of my small hometown, Delhi. Their DNA is part of who I am.

Learning Tuesdays Webinar Representation

On November 8th, Heather Zellers represented RSA and NREAC along with Tim Taylor of the California Small School Districts' Association on the Grade Level Reading (GLR) Learning Tuesdays Webinar - Beyond the Headlines: What Can We Learn from a Closer look at NAEP. Panelists representing the perspectives of rural and urban districts, charter schools as well as Department of Defense Education Activity schools shared some of the key lessons from the pandemic and what we might be able to extract from the recent release of NAEP scores.

To watch the webinar, visit:

Learning Tuesdays | Beyond the Headlines: What Can We Learn from a Closer Look at NAEP

<https://bit.ly/learningtuesdays>

Re-Thinking Poverty Indicators in K-12 Education

Tara Thomas, Analyst of Public Policy and Advocacy for The School Superintendents Association, AASA and Heather Zellers of RSA/NREAC will be presenting on Re-Thinking Poverty Indicators in a webinar co-hosted by RSA and the Four County School Boards Association. RSA would like to thank Sue Wyatt, Steve Miskell and the Legislative Committee of Four County SBA for the opportunity. Please visit the Four County SBA website to register for the webinar: <https://www.fourcountysba.org/>

For decades, policymakers, administrators, and researchers have used Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) data as a measure for student poverty. As more states move to universal school meals and more districts participate in Community Eligibility Provision, it is important to recognize the impact these policies will have on FRPL Data and the ability of districts to allocate money to students who need more resources. It is critical that a Congress creates a reliable, accurate poverty indicator for schools that is separate from FRPL data and school nutrition.

AASA, FRAC and First Focus on Children are convening a working group of federal education advocates for a comprehensive conversation about improving poverty indicators for education, what measures could be used in lieu of FRPL moving forward, and develop strategies to advocate for change.

RSA AT NYSSBA

Your Rural Schools Association had the chance to meet many of our board and superintendent members at the NYSSBA Convention October 28th and 29th. Most thought that they would be able to check in with David Little as he has been a fixture at NYSSBA conventions, but an angry gallbladder got in the way. Regardless, we were still able to have many good discussions about issues facing our rural school districts.

Heather Zellers, Director of Information and Advocacy and Scott Bischooping, Director of Development and Member Services manned a booth in the vendor hall along with the help of several RSA Board Members. Both current and potential members were able to ask questions and get information while getting to know about the new RSA format and staff.

David O'Rourke filled in for Dave Little at the RSA Breakfast on Friday morning and shared his insights on the enrollment decreases that rural schools are facing and some of the ways that school districts can offer depth of transcript opportunities while maintaining the community presence of our schools.

His presentation is available here: <https://bit.ly/orourke-nyssba>

Huge thanks to Mike DiPerna and C&S Companies for sponsoring our breakfast. We would not be able to carry out all of the activities that we do without our partners like C&S Companies.

RSA 2022-23 Legislative Priorities

Last year, your RSA used a series of Rural Issues Forums throughout the state to glean your most important legislative priorities. They formed the contents of *The Forgotten Family Member*, a powerful policy brief on rural school challenges. That policy brief is now being used by the State Education Department and legislature to include a rural perspective in state policy.

This fall, RSA conducted a member survey to determine the top legislative priority focus of the association. The response was significant and the results were conclusive. At its recent annual retreat, the RSA Board of Directors approved the association's legislative priorities without any change from those supported by RSA member districts.

Six items were listed almost two to one over other concerns (which remain significant and which will form the basis of efforts by RSA whenever there is an opportunity to influence policy.) However, these six items clearly show which concerns are foremost in the minds of RSA member school districts. As such, they will form the legislative platform for RSA in the upcoming legislative and congressional sessions.

1. School Aid: Despite healthy aid levels from Albany and Washington in the past couple of years, there is an increasing concern about the “funding cliff” when the state has fulfilled its 3 year “full funding” program and federal rescue funding has been expended. The state must prepare for the next generation of equitable and adequate funding.

2. Student Physical and Mental Health: The pandemic has created physical and psychological challenges for all students, but they have been exacerbated by the isolation created by distance and lack of internet access in rural areas (essentially creating solitary confinement for many children.) Acting out, slowed emotional growth and lower learning levels have all been identified as issues in need of immediate and significant attention if this generation of rural students is to recover and thrive.

3. School Staffing Shortages: Whether it's hard to find subject area teachers or non-instructional staff, the inability to attract and retain school staff looms large in the concerns of RSA member districts. While enticing teachers into rural districts has always been a challenge, the competition in the midst of a general teaching shortage has increased the magnitude of the problem. Districts compete with each other and with other businesses for non-instructional staff. Without state incentives to work in rural schools, districts will be compelled to use non certified educators and cope with potentially subpar support.

4. School Safety: The slaughter of school children and staff continues unabated. Substantial resources must be provided to districts to offer them the best available protection, while state policies involving the interplay between mental illness and gun access must result in diminishing the likelihood that schools remain the “target of choice” for those disposed to mass violence.

5. Learning Recovery: Recent test scores reveal a level of learning loss and a lack of progress that would have been unthinkable had it not been for the unique circumstances of the pandemic. After school, summer programing, weekend programing, coordinated recreational/educational activities in addition to traditional supplemental educational support services are needed immediately to reverse the course for this generation of students. Without such assistance, the effects of the pandemic will compound over the course of a student's educational experience, ultimately having a profound impact not only on their own quality of life, but that of society at large. The old expression “if you think education's expensive, try ignorance” will become our state's chief concern if allowed to play out unaddressed.

6. Transportation: This concern has two distinct aspects: First, there is the issue of the lack of availability of transportation staff. This can be addressed by the state enacting its own school bus driver licensing requirements and through financial incentives. The second concern is the timeline and practicality of electric buses in rural school districts. The state needs a back-up funding stream for its electric bus mandate, should the environmental bond act fail. It needs a workable timetable for implementation and its funding needs to include not only the cost of adding charging stations, but the removal of existing fueling stations, the impact on shared services with municipalities and the lack of competition among electric bus companies (leading to exorbitant pricing.)

2022-23 RSA GOALS

Each year your Rural Schools Association holds a Board of Director retreat to strategically plan how best to serve you, our member districts. This work isn't about our mission statement, or our broad vision but a practical list of how we'll use our resources to hone in on what you need most. They're distinct from our Legislative Priorities, which direct us in our advocacy efforts on your behalf. We hope you'll agree that these goals will make your district and your association stronger.

1. Conduct a series of Rural Issues Forums throughout the state. Much like those conducted prior to the pandemic, these forums will highlight RSA's position in addressing rural issues, provide a forum for discussion and community participation in RSA advocacy and link RSA to local, state and federal leaders, as well as business and higher educational representatives. We need to hear not only from rural districts, but from the communities that host them. They're the most direct way to get the latest information from every rural corner of our state. They'll take place throughout the winter and spring. Look for details of the forum in your area!

2. Continue to develop the new RSA structure to be responsive to member needs, to provide events and information that will improve the effectiveness and efficiency of rural school districts and align RSA efforts to rural challenges in a timely and productive manner. Rural schools have triumphed mightily throughout both the Great Recession and then the pandemic. Your RSA's advocacy has helped allocate unprecedented resources toward coping with those milestone events.

RSA has also grown during this time, becoming independent of its traditional Cornell collaboration so we can be more nimble, more cost efficient, and most importantly, more effective in serving you. We are in our first year of the new structure and are dedicated to making sure we focus on serving you better than ever.

To that end we have replaced our Deputy Director position at Cornell with two new positions; Director of Information and Advocacy Heather Zellers and Director of Member Services and Development Scott Bischooping. We jettisoned our Cornell administrative assistant position in favor of outsourcing new systems for registration, membership and a complete overhaul of our website, social media and other connections. It's a new day and we hope you'll soon agree that we're a better RSA for you.

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3. Conduct a membership drive that includes addressing the misperception that RSA membership is a benefit of the superintendent rather than the district. Develop electronic listserves to be as inclusive and as current as possible so that the district's entire leadership team receives RSA material. Be visible at other association events to encourage interaction between RSA and member/non-member districts alike. This strategy is intended to make your RSA as representative, visible and influential in our advocacy for you as possible. RSA needs to represent ALL rural districts, so that every state leader has a connection to their local school districts and their association. During the pandemic, some districts failed to renew their RSA membership and for us to be as effective as possible for all districts, we need to reunite, showing them the value of membership, as well as their responsibility to not place the full responsibility of advocacy on the backs of their sister districts.

4. Continue work on legislative priorities to ensure improvements to those significant challenges identified by the membership. RSA has been remarkably successful (for you) in its advocacy in recent years. With state leaders largely hailing from urban areas, rural school districts need a champion to ensure the rural perspective is heard in the halls of the Capitol, State Education Department, Congress and the White House. We've taken the lead in national rural education advocacy as your RSA chairs the National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition of the rural school associations of all states. We serve on the board of the National Rural Education Association and chair its foundation. RSA's influence during decisions on federal rescue funding was a source of pride and success among all other states. At the state level, funding increases directed specifically at rural schools and extraordinary new total aid levels were the result of influential advocacy on your behalf. Your RSA is devoted to rural districts receiving the resources needed to succeed!

5. Develop the Winter Conference to more closely align with the Summer Conference in order to provide a significant learning opportunity for members and visibility as a leader in addressing challenges of rural districts. As a result, The Gathering to be held in Saratoga Springs (the site chosen by you) the first week in December, will bring together top notch professional development and information on the most important issues facing our students and our districts. Top state leaders and top programmatic presentations will combine with the chance to see Saratoga's Victorian Stroll and enjoy the Bills play the Patriots! We've made it BOCES aidable and eligible for federal rescue funding. Centrally located, as inexpensive as possible for your district and as enjoyable as any conference you've ever attended, The Gathering is our effort to replicate the Summer Conference at The Otesaga in December. See you there!

6. Pursue connections with institutions of higher education and business partners to continue research opportunities and to provide members with the most current services available. Your RSA has always had a focus on providing you with the latest and most relevant research to help you lead your district. In the past, that effort has gone through Cornell. Our independence from the university doesn't mean that effort will cease, as we continue to partner with Cornell staff in both research and in presenting it to you at convenient forums like NYSCOSS and NYSBBA conventions.

However, we now have the ability to work with whichever higher educational institution best fits our members' needs. So, when we needed to bring civics back into the educational forefront, we partner with Columbia's Teachers College. When we see a great new administrative leadership program, we work with Houghton, etc. We work continually with our business partners to showcase the most timely programs and services to make you both efficient and effective (which also helps us keep your membership dues at the amazingly low level of just \$850 per year for the past several years.) Their support allows us to do great things for kids like our Student Video Contest, scholarships for FFA oratorical contest winners at our Summer Conference and sending rural students to the International Youth Institute, as well as great things for you like bringing in the very best national speakers at our conferences.

We think these goals are achievable and will improve the work of our member districts. If you have a suggestion for what we do or how we do it, please get it to us! Your RSA's best feature is how close we are to our members and we always want to be doing our very best on your behalf!

REGISTRATION NOW OPEN!

WE INVITE YOU TO JOIN US FOR
THE GATHERING
TWO DAYS OF FUN AND LEARNING

- December 1st & 2nd | Courtyard Marriott | Saratoga Springs, New York -

High Level Professional Development for Boards, Superintendents, Business Officials,
Building Leaders, Guidance Counselors, Social Workers and Educators

THURSDAY DECEMBER 1st (1pm-6pm)
SCHOOL AID SUMMIT
"AFTER FULL FUNDING FOR EVERYONE"

State Education Commissioner Betty Rosa
Hon. Shelley Mayer (Senate Education Committee Chair)
Michael Rebell (Director Center for Educational Equity,
author and lead attorney CFE and CEE lawsuits)
Panel of Advocates: NYSCOSS' Bob Lowry, ASBO's Brian
Cechnicki, and Rural Schools Association's Dave Little



THURSDAY NIGHT HOLIDAY FUN & FOOTBALL
Join us Thursday evening for Saratoga's Annual
Victorian Stroll (holiday lights, music, rides, food, and
shopping circa 1880 Saratoga Springs! Then come back
to the Marriott for our Bills vs. Patriots Party!

FRIDAY DECEMBER 2nd (8am-3pm)
STUDENT CENTERED SUMMIT
"SCHOOL CLIMATE CHANGE"

National Educational Policy Leader, Brad Mitchell
SED Assistant Commissioner, Kathleen DeCataldo
on new student safety guidelines
YMCA on prepping students for civic participation
Democracy Ready NY will discuss holding
successful tough classroom discussions
Panel discussions on civil discourse in the classroom, legal
considerations, and resources available to schools

Conference Registration eligible for BOCES Aid
Conference Costs eligible for Federal Rescue Aid
Conference Hotel Rate Extended Through Weekend

REGISTER ONLINE TODAY!
<https://bit.ly/rsawinter22>

Event Hosted By:
Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex BOCES
and the Rural Schools Association of New York



HAVE QUESTIONS? NEED ASSISTANCE? PLEASE EMAIL RSA@RSANY.ORG OR CALL (518) 750-4223

ATTENTION!

RURAL SCHOOL COUNSELORS

I AM CONDUCTING A RESEARCH STUDY ABOUT SCHOOL COUNSELORS' EXPERIENCES AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS IN RURAL SCHOOLS. PLEASE CONSIDER PARTICIPATING.

GIFT CARDS ARE AVAILABLE!

Kendra Bircher-Hollie, a student in the Counselor Education and Supervision PhD program at Adams State University, is conducting a study about school counselors' experiences as instructional leaders in rural schools and would like your help. Please share her study with school counselors or directors in your area.

<https://bit.ly/rscounselors>

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