

# WHAT IS NEW YORK STATE'S CHOICE FOR RURAL SCHOOLS?

☐ THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

☐ THE *heart* OF EVERYTHING





## The Rural School Connection

**In the post-pandemic era, the State of New York must make a fundamental decision about public education in its rural communities. Will our rural schools be vibrant economic and social incubators that properly prepare their children to rebuild the state's rural culture into a viable life choice, or will graduation from a rural school district too often point to a life of diminished opportunity?**

During the past few months, the Rural Schools Association of New York State embarked on a series of Rural Issues Forums across the state. Reaching every region, the forums attracted not only school leaders but business representatives, state and federal officials, higher education heads, directors of social and community programs, utility and military participants and community members.

In each region, forum attendees were afforded the opportunity to relay their most pressing concerns, hopes, and dreams for the future of their schools and community. They were also able to share any suggestions they had for addressing their concerns and building towards their dreams.

This policy brief is the culmination of the work of those forums. The Rural Schools Association (RSA) has ranked the top issues and challenges expressed throughout the state and explains them below. Individually each issue is a concise discussion of what's holding back our rural schools and the communities that host them. Collectively they form a directive to local, state and federal policymakers on what must be addressed (and when possible, how) if rural New York State is to regain its position as a vital component of our state's economy and its viability as a lifestyle choice.





## From Challenges Come Opportunities

Most people don't realize that New York State has one of the largest rural populations in the nation. Yet they do realize that New York State is home to some of the most magnificent rural locations, with names they easily recognize like the Finger Lakes, Catskills, Adirondacks, Thousand Islands, Niagara Frontier, Southern Tier and more.

Older New Yorkers will recall a time when the state's rural economy was a significant contributor to state revenues, leading to robust communities, a greater rural population and tens of thousands of businesses. Land devoted to agricultural production was two and a half times that of present day New York State and the rural economy thrived enough to help New York City out of its financial collapse.

Sadly, almost half a century later, the Great Recession brought upstate New York one of the largest outward migrations in United States history; second only to the Dust Bowl of the Depression Era.

In fact, according to the U.S. Census, a million New Yorkers left our rural communities for other states during that time. They left because they needed jobs and New York's rural businesses largely either closed their doors or found more hospitable economic conditions elsewhere.

The pandemic followed on the heels of this exodus, highlighting rural New York's lack of the necessary broadband internet access needed to conduct business in a post pandemic environment.

Now, thankfully the outward migration has ceased and New York's rural population has stabilized. The rural economy is slowly attempting to rebuild and thanks to an investment of state and federal emergency aid, our schools have begun restoring needed programs and services. There has also been progress in bringing broadband access to our more remote communities, allowing for relocation and opportunity.

A committed and comprehensive approach to our rural areas and their schools can result in the restoration of both the rural economy's ability to contribute to state revenues and the collective rural community's ability to provide a productive and happy life for their residents. At the Rural Schools Association, we remain committed to this pursuit.



## - Getting to the Heart of It - Key Issues & Considerations

For New York State to regain its rural viability, it must address its most significant challenges. It cannot (as it did during the mass exodus during the Great Recession) ignore the issues out of fear that talking about them would scare away potential business investment. While most state leaders reside and represent larger communities, they must understand that rural New York schools have concerns and needs that are both similar and different from urban and suburban counterparts.

**Based on our forums and outreach, here are the top issues of concern to rural New Yorkers:**



Federal rescue funds directing aid to schools and affording the state the ability to fully fund its Foundation Aid formula have offered a temporary reprieve to financially deprived rural schools. However, most rural school districts have already been fully funded and in recent years many have only received a small percentage increase that does not even mirror the rate of inflation.

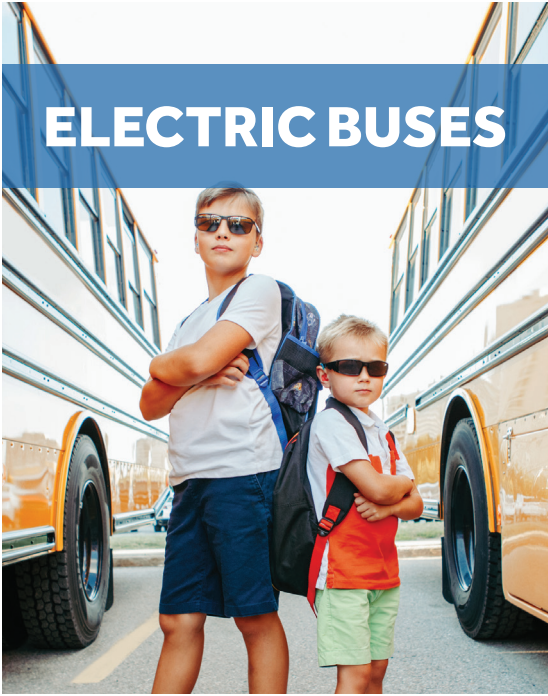
While full funding of the existing formula is a significant accomplishment, that formula is now a generation old, uses 23-year-old census data, includes now largely irrelevant categories and fails to factor in current important needs and cost; such as student mental health. All schools will soon be fully funded under the old formula and so every district will be on “Save Harmless”, perhaps receiving only the minimal increases afforded other districts that have become fully funded.

With new graduation measures on the horizon there needs to be a change in the approach to state funding to ensure students meet those measures. A flat percentage for all districts may be politically expedient, but does not meet the needs of many of our rural districts. The work of creating a new and more equitable system must start immediately.

The crux of the problem is that, more than any other state, New York relies on localities to pay the cost of public education, creating unacceptable differences in the quality of the state mandated public education provided to children. Our state’s highest court has interpreted that constitutional right to mean the provision of a Regents diploma. While the current formula was revolutionary, that day has passed and New York must do the hard work of creating a new and relevant formula to meet the needs of today’s students. That is a time and labor-intensive process that must begin immediately. It has taken the state more than the full duration of a child’s public educational experience (18 years) to uphold its court ordered constitutional obligation. A new approach will take time to study, agree and fund. The state’s children cannot wait while our leaders vacillate and weigh potential political implications.



## ELECTRIC BUSES



The state requirement that school buses have zero emissions (effectively requiring electric buses) is one of the top concerns of rural schools. Questions abound regarding how to build, acquire and pay for the change. For rural schools, the logistical challenges are more severe. Rural school leaders have registered concerns that the buses need to successfully navigate the long distances involved in rural transportation, over often hilly terrain, frequently in very cold or hot temperatures.

The question of cost is at the forefront, as the buses are significantly more expensive than traditional buses, do not fit in many of the current bus garages and pose potential construction costs due to the need to build charging stations and remove fueling depots. Financial issues extend to the complications of debt on existing buses and facilities that are often shared with municipalities or other school districts. Beyond finances, transportation officials have expressed concern at the weight of electric buses on roads and bridges never designed to hold such loads every day.

Perhaps most fundamental, electric grid officials have indicated a concern regarding the ability to get the needed power to schools due to a lack of infrastructure. Since rural districts are often able to raise only minimal amounts locally under the state's tax cap, the thought of paying an extra \$200,000 or more per bus is daunting indeed. Certainly, as we approach the state's deadline for implementation, the issues mentioned related to this worthy but difficult goal must be resolved.

## STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH & SAFETY



Schools have no greater responsibility than the health and safety of the children in their care. Yet, school shootings continue to jeopardize the safety of every child in a seemingly never ending nightmare of terror for children, their families and their communities.

The proliferation of (and reliance on) electronic devices for social interaction has created a new and potentially negative developmental environment for many children. It's a new age and thus far, we have not served our children well. While it's true that we largely triumphed over the pandemic's myriad implications, we have yet to recover from the anxiety produced by years of unheard-of challenges and the loss of a formerly assumed sense of personal security and belonging.

Mental health services are a time intensive and personally interactive process. Individual attention and caring are the basis of addressing deep seated student concerns. Once again, for rural schools these formidable challenges are made more daunting by the financial inability to obtain staffing to help. Unlike other locales, New York doesn't offer telehealth services for student mental health. By default (in rural areas where in person services are unobtainable) this amounts to an unconscionable ban on rural mental health services for children. This issue must be addressed immediately, as many lives can be ruined in the time it takes to make typically incremental policy changes.





## STAFF RETENTION & RECRUITMENT

Getting the staff needed to operate a school district has become difficult in all schools across our nation. The pandemic, social ills, school shootings, the cost of obtaining advanced degrees, comparatively lower earning power, have all combined to challenge schools to find the staff they need. For rural schools, it is more than challenging: It is a crisis.

We heard several reasons from our rural school leaders as to why: While most schools have fewer applicants than in prior eras, rural schools typically have salary structures that are below their urban and suburban counterparts. Rural regions tend to lack the affordable housing within their communities that allows those entering the teaching and related professions to reside in a rural community. Rural districts often fail to offer collegial mentoring and support to new staff, as well as a competitive financial future. While many employ innovations like on line work-alike groups to help, many rural districts don't have the amenities that suburban or urban districts do - whether in the schools or the communities.

Even when rural schools are able to recruit new staff, they are often lost to higher paying districts after they have received training and tenure. Other states have done far more to address this crisis and there is much New York State could do. Individual districts in New York are involved in innovative practices. The state should determine those most likely to succeed and make a concerted effort to fund them.



## STUDENT-CAREER CONNECTIONS

The earlier children are exposed to career options, the more they are encouraged to develop the skills needed to perform their chosen career with excellence. While there are a number of excellent programs available to older students that allow them to explore career opportunities, they are typically available only late in a student's educational career.

New York State needs to incorporate career exposure in the early grades; frequent and immersive experiences that will inspire children to develop traits and skills naturally as they mature. As with other issues and needs, the difficulty in providing these opportunities currently is the availability of resources. The advent of virtual tools has expanded exposure, but financial and structural barriers need to be overcome to provide students with the kinds of experiences that can inspire and motivate them.

Our state has a remarkably geographically accessible state university and community college system. It has a financially incentivized regional educational service network through BOCES, as well as county and state services for children. These networks could be synthesized to effectively allow students to explore the broad range of careers available in our state. The value in this approach goes far beyond simply encouraging students to pursue a career in New York State. It also aligns business needs with a ready workforce and can help curtail the exodus of both business and young adults from our state, allowing rural communities to once again "grow their own" by providing local employment opportunities.



## Additional Concerns

### REGIONALISM

Rural district leaders discussed taking advantage of the many opportunities that are offered through BOCES and other shared work with neighboring districts. There was also the request for more options such as regional high schools which could provide more opportunities for students while holding down costs. The State Education Department is currently exploring legislation to authorize greater flexibility in choosing shared and regional educational programs and services. There is a shared desire to continue the increase in the maximum salary of a BOCES teacher that could be considered for BOCES aid to assist in providing needed staffing.

### IMPACT OF ELECTRONICS & SOCIAL MEDIA ON STUDENTS

Social media has had a significant impact on the lives of students. Rural students are often more isolated by geography. The use of social media and electronic devices has both brought the world closer to our rural students and isolated them further. This area connects with the student mental health needs mentioned earlier.

### ACCESS TO BROADBAND INTERNET INFRASTRUCTURE

The pandemic served to highlight the dramatic disparity in the availability of broadband internet services between our urban/suburban areas and our rural communities. In the past couple of years, access has improved but areas without broadband access are still common. That is unacceptable given that broadband internet access is the key to building the new rural economy and providing rural students with viable employment.

### TRANSITION FROM RURAL SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

There are significant concerns about the inability of our rural students to find success at the college level. There are likely several reasons such as moving from the environment of a small community and school to a larger entity, not having access to the same level of challenging coursework that is available in larger schools, or lack of adequate career exploration opportunities.

Despite the close proximity of SUNY campuses and community colleges, rural students are particularly challenged at the post secondary level, as they attempt to fill the void left by the inability of rural schools to provide a competitive curriculum (in comparison to wealthier suburban and urban school districts.) Regardless of the reasons, there needs to be a concerted effort at all levels to help increase the post-secondary success of our rural school graduates.

### MANDATES

In a district in which administrative personnel often have to fill multiple critical roles, the addition of unfunded requirements of the schools is a significant impediment. With budget concerns referred to earlier, it is not a simple process to add or shift staffing to meet needs. There has been attention given to this at the state level recently. Any new initiative needs to be reviewed not only for the direct intent, but also the unanticipated costs. In rural schools, each new mandate should not only be related to a worthy cause, but judged in comparison to what will inevitably need to be jettisoned in order to afford the new effort.







## Your Support Empowers Our Commitment to Rural Students, Educators, and Communities.

For a comprehensive listing of rural challenges and how we're working to address them, visit [www.rsany.org](http://www.rsany.org) or contact David A. Little, Esq., Executive Director, via email ([dlittle@rsany.org](mailto:dlittle@rsany.org)) or phone (518.888.4598).



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