



**TESTIMONY OF THE RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION  
BEFORE THE JOINT LEGISLATIVE BUDGET COMMITTEE  
ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION PUBLIC HEARING  
2023**

To the Chairs and Members of the Joint Budget Committee:

I am David Little, Executive Director of the Rural Schools Association of New York State and I am grateful for the opportunity to relay the impact of the Executive Budget proposal on the rural schools of our state and on the communities that host them.

For many districts, the plan follows a pattern established in last year's state budget. Changes to most district aid levels in this Executive Budget plan are largely due to changes in enrollment, Free and Reduced Price Lunch percentages, changes in the Combined Wealth Ration and the number of English Language Learning students. In other words, unlike plans under prior administrations, there is a degree of predictability and transparency in this proposal. The plan would succeed in fully funding Foundation Aid under the current (albeit severely outdated) formula and everyone (those on Save Harmless) would receive at least a 3% Foundation Aid increase. The impact of the increase is however less effective given the high current rate of inflation, reducing the purchasing power of the increase. Nonetheless, we are grateful for the attempt to finally fully fund Foundation Aid; even if in name only (as \$250 million that is being counted toward full funding is in fact categorical aid for High Impact Tutoring.)

There are perhaps unintended and questionable consequences in making this last installment on full funding of Foundation Aid, namely that many of the wealthiest districts in the state receive large increases. This is because fully funding low wealth districts was a priority and now these wealthier districts are the last to receive full funding (and their large percentage increases are often associated with low levels of state aid due to their wealth.) Some districts that would not

be thought of as high need nonetheless have recently been affected by changes in aid generating factors like FRPL percentage, enrollment, etc. **Low need districts in fact receive the highest percentage of increase of any demographic under the plan, while high need rural schools receive the least.**

There are a few pleasant surprises beyond finally achieving full funding...There is a plan to fund school based mental health centers. School based services are at the heart of a district's role as a leader in their community and students certainly need additional mental health services in a convenient and nonthreatening environment. School based services take the least time away from a student's school day and there is little stigma attached to "going to the office" rather than to an outside provider.

Similarly there is a large increase of \$125 million for pre-k funding (continuing increases that approximate last year's.) This is sorely needed, particularly in high need districts that have lagged behind in building these proven programs due to the inability to provide their own funding up front and wait for state reimbursement.

There are four proposals glaringly missing from the Executive Budget plan. First, there is no plan to continue Universal School Meals. Given the obvious benefits of creating equal nutritional opportunities for students, as well as the mental health benefits of ending the "shaming" of impoverished children, we believe the legislature must address this issue and demand it be included in the final state budget agreement. Secondly, the BOCES aidible cap for salaries must be revised to reflect a more realistic marketplace, if our state is to adequately prepare an effective workforce and robust economy. Third, the Executive Budget fails to reinstate prior year aid claims. It is unconscionable for the state to simply decide to renege on its debts to school districts and the taxpayers who have overpaid. Finally, the undesignated fund balance limit must be adjusted to protect local taxpayers from wide fluctuations in tax rates. Our schools are too dependent on state aid to rely on such a low allowable fund balance limit. Any other municipality with a 4% fund balance would be declared to be in fiscal distress. Our taxpayers deserve to be protected from wide tax rate swings resulting from state aid variations from year to year.

There are few proposals that would siphon off funding or shift the funding onus to local districts. There are few "poison pill" proposals to divert state efforts away from funding. There is also, sadly little in the way of improvements or additions of programs that would be of help as districts attempt to build their programs back better than they were prior to the pandemic. There is a little more clarity to the electric bus plan, with allowances for longer purchase and leasing provisions and state plans to fund charging stations and other infrastructure needed to accomplish the transition from fossil fuels. Significantly more support and clarity is needed if this plan is to become operational within the time frame allotted.

**THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM:** The issue left unaddressed (whether intentionally or not) is what the state plans to do next year, now that they've fully funded Foundation Aid under the current (and old) formula. There was no mention of a task force to study what it will take to educate this

generation within the state's constitutional responsibility to provide a "sound, basic education" for each child. There was no mention of whether the state will simply seek to add an across the board percentage next year (as you have done this year and last with those districts on Save Harmless...with every district now on Save Harmless-will you "take the easy road" and simply say a percentage for all, irrespective of need? This would be the most inequitable method possible.

This approach would not only would ignore true need, based on today rather than a generation ago, but it would establish across the board increases as the norm. The first year that the state has a downturn and is unable to provide sufficient universal increases-or God forbid a cut, those cuts would have a disproportionate impact on high need districts (that receive the most aid to be cut and rely most heavily on the state for their funding.) The state's effort must now be laser-like in its focus on creating a new and equitable funding mechanism for state Foundation Aid.

Also missing from the Executive Budget plan is tax relief. Efforts to stimulate the state economy and attract residents and businesses back into the state (following the nation's history's second largest outward migration over the past 12 years) are severely hampered by our high property and income taxes, compared to sister states. Luring them back would be enhanced by tax relief, but there is little mention of it in this year's plan.

Under the premise that first you do no harm, the 2023 Executive Budget proposal is far superior to those of prior administrations. Even where it falls short, it is straightforward and reflects the administration's willingness to negotiate in good faith, stay on topic rather than divert attention and force you as legislative leaders to "buy back" proposals you wish to reject from the final agreement. This is a fair place to begin the discussion, which is in itself a far cry better than we've come to expect in public education.

## **RENEWING RURAL**

### **RSA LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES**

This fall, RSA conducted a survey to determine the top legislative priorities of rural school leaders. The response was significant and the results were conclusive. Six items were listed almost two to one over other concerns. Our rural students cannot currently compete with their urban and suburban counterparts. Despite graduating at the state's highest rates, three quarters of them never receive any form of higher education credential. Jobs requiring only a high school education no longer await our young adults on their return to their home communities. Forming an effective approach to their success is our state's only hope of thriving into the next generation. Here's what needs to be done:

**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. Generation old Foundation Aid factors

no longer reflect the present needs of students. Mental health, transience, post-pandemic effects and the influx of English Language Learners (to name just a few) currently pose significant challenges for our rural schools and yet the present formula fails to recognize their impact. Work must begin immediately to ensure that a new formula is in place next year when all schools will “be on Save Harmless”.

**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, emotional retardation, 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. Addressing these unique post pandemic symptoms may be our generation’s greatest challenge. Just think of it; we have high school students that never attended middle school, going straight from elementary to high school. Our failure to meet their needs would have lasting and far reaching social implications.

**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 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 subpar support. Whether we choose to help repay student loans (like we do in urban districts) or subsidize housing or authorize a four day school week (like other rural states) we can no longer ignore the unique challenges of securing school staff for the one third of our state’s students who live in rural communities. (As such, we fully support the extension of the retiree earnings limitation, which should help schools in this time of severe shortage.)

**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 of schools as the “target of choice” for those disposed to violence. It is undebatable that protecting the children in our care must be our state’s highest priority. Simply put, if we can’t bring children to a central location without leaving their safety to chance and hope, we have no business bringing them there. Both education funding and state policies on the mental health-gun access nexus must be addressed if we are to literally save the children in our care.

**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 programming, weekend programming, 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.)

Thank you for your attention and dedication to these critically important needs and for your anticipated support of public education.

Respectfully submitted,

*DAVID A. LITTLE*

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Executive Director