As the 2018 legislative session opens and Governor Cuomo offers his State of the State Message, the fiscal atmosphere for rural schools is likely to be challenging. The state faces a well-publicized deficit and the federal administration has proposed cuts that would have implications for state spending. The Board of Regents and the Educational Conference Board have both indicated a need for roughly a billion and a half in additional state aid to keep schools on track academically. Meeting these demands simultaneously will require artful state budgeting, particularly given that recent state budgets have frozen other state spending to provide healthier increases to public education. Your Rural Schools Association will be at the forefront of advocacy efforts to prioritize state spending on our fiscally challenged school districts.

This year’s State of the State Message omits major public education policy changes: Gone are the days of calling for new teacher evaluations and picking rhetorical fights with our schools. What remains is likely to be an intense debate over the level of school funding; both the total amount of any increase
(or God forbid, funding cuts) and within the total, who and what is prioritized.

FROM THE GOVERNOR'S LIST OF "STATE OF THE STATE" PROPOSALS
PLANS AFFECTING OUR RURAL SCHOOLS

The descriptions provided are quoted from the governor's office.

Ban Lunch Shaming Statewide

"The Governor will propose a law that when passed, would immediately end the practice of lunch shaming of any kind. First, it will prohibit any public act to humiliate a student who cannot afford lunch. Second, it will ban alternative lunches and require students to receive the same lunch as others starting in the 2018-19 school year."

Require Breakfast "After the Bell"

"In order to allow students to have breakfast and to prevent them from going hungry during morning classes, Governor Cuomo will propose requiring schools with more than 70 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch to provide breakfast after the school day has begun for the next school year. In successful breakfast after the bell programs, schools can either serve breakfast in the classroom, or offer nutritious vending machines options to ensure that students have access to breakfast as they start their day. In the city of Newburgh, where Breakfast After the Bell was implemented during the 2015-16 school year, schools have seen their breakfast participation rates increase by more than 100 percent. To ease the transition, the state will provide technical assistance and capital funds for equipment such as coolers and vending machines to support
breakfast after the bell. An estimated $7 million in capital funds will support expanded breakfast for 1,400 schools.”

**Expand the Farm to School Program**

“New York will double the state’s investment in the Farm to School program to support the use of healthy, local, New York foods in school districts across the state. The Farm to School program was created to connect schools with local farmers and offers technical assistance and capacity in the school to source products locally to help schools provide students with nutritious meals from food produced by local farms. Previous rounds of funding for this program have increased access to healthy, farm-fresh food for 324,000 students. This funding can be used for capital costs to support transporting and storing locally produced food, and to hire farm-to-school coordinators and trainings for crops and food preparation.

Governor Cuomo proposes doubling the state’s investment to add $750,000 for a total of $1.5 million in Farm to School projects. If passed, the program would serve an estimated total of 18 projects and 328,000 additional students, bringing the estimated total number of students served to 652,000.”

**Increase the Use of Farm-Fresh, Locally Grown Foods at School**

“To incentivize school districts to use more local farm-fresh products, Governor Cuomo will propose an increase in the reimbursement schools receive for lunches from the current 5.9 cents per meal to 25 cents per meal for any district that purchases at least 30 percent ingredients from New York farms. This is a win-win for students as well as New York's local farms.”
RSA ANALYSIS

WHAT THE PROPOSALS MEAN FOR OUR RURAL SCHOOLS

Funding, funding, funding. This year, our advocacy will by necessity focus on retaining recent gains in funding for our fiscally challenged schools. But the purpose of the State of the State is to lay out policy, not finances. Fiscal plans will come shortly when the governor presents his Executive Budget proposal. Here’s what we think of the new policies offered by the governor.

Like most legislative proposals, the governor’s student nutrition plans are a mix of helpful funding increases and unfunded mandates. While no one would criticize banning the practice of shaming children who cannot afford to pay for their lunch, the governor’s plan doesn’t explain how schools are to pay to provide high quality lunches to all students without any increase in state reimbursement. His plan to require schools with a student FRPL rate of 70% to offer breakfast after the start of the school day makes no mention of the resulting impact on academic scheduling. Yet, in another part of his plan to improve student hunger issues, the governor proposes paying much more to schools that use locally grown food for at least 30% of their total food consumption. That plan certainly has the potential to improve school finances, student hunger and local agricultural marketing. Similarly, doubling the Farm to School Program to allow more schools to participate can only have a positive impact on rural schools that are included.

Your Rural Schools Association is helping to lead New York Grown Foods for New York Kids, a coalition of nearly 70 public health, school, farm, anti-hunger and environmental organizations. RSA applauds Governor Andrew Cuomo’s ‘No Student Goes Hungry’ proposal in the 2018 State of the State. The proposal would double the size of the state’s Farm to School grants program
while offering the largest state incentive in the country to help schools purchase healthy food grown on local farms.

Thus, it would provide economic opportunities for local farmers and job growth in rural communities while improving the health of the 1.7 million kids eating meals in K-12 schools across New York. According to a recent report by American Farmland Trust and New York Academy of Medicine, if institutions, such as K-12 schools, receiving state funds to buy food spent at least 25% of their food dollars on food grown in New York, it could add another $200 million to the state’s economy while positively impacting the health of 6.6 million New Yorkers.

As advocates for our students, we obviously want a healthy nutritional and emotional environment in our schools. We’re eager to support the programs suggested above, but will need guidance in how we might fully participate without impeding existing academic programs. Since in New York we tend to layer on new ideas on top of existing requirements (rather than replace outdated mandates with better ones) we’ll need our state leaders to remember that there’s only so much time in the day and so much money in the budget. Our schools are masters at making the most out of existing resources, but help is always appreciated!

These proposals will affect many of our schools to some degree, but the State Budget will significantly affect all of our schools. We appreciate the ideas and the recognition that issues of hunger and poverty weigh on our children. These proposals may help. The proof of whether the state is committed to helping, however, will be in the level of state aid provided and in whether that aid helps or hurts our state’s most financially challenged school districts.