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PRESSURE ON RURAL SCHOOLS RELEASED AS STATE AND FEDS CHANGE COURSE

It's been a banner week for local control in public education. First, both houses of Congress passed the Every Student Success Act (the successor to the long expired but still enforced No Child Left Behind Act.) Passed yesterday by the Senate, the approach restricts much of the authority of the U.S. Secretary of Education, empowers the states to adjust student testing and focuses on school districts in distress. Just as importantly, the new law does not drive the use of standardized testing, nor does it allow federal funds to “follow the student”, reducing funding to public schools in favor of private and parochial schools. Following years of advocacy, the new law appears to do a great deal to reduce compliance demands on local school districts. It is now before President Obama, who has indicated support for the measure.

New York State appears to be wasting little time in taking advantage of the expected latitude afforded by the new federal law. Governor Cuomo's Common Core Task Force is releasing its recommendations later today. However, in a conversation with the governor's top public education advisor, Deputy Secretary for Education Jere Hochman, we can relay a great deal about what rural school districts can expect this year. The report will set a three year timetable for altering the state's course in the areas of standards, curriculum, student testing and teacher evaluations. An overarching goal appears to be infusing the revision process with information from local schools. Here is what we know at present:

1. **EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS.** The task force report urges the state to take the next three years to tie in the beneficial elements of what is currently used and then build New York State specific standards (eventually backing away from the national-scope Common Core Learning Standards.) After the first cycle of evaluating all subjects, each subject area would be periodically reviewed and updated on a set schedule. The standards, according to the report, should remain rigorous, but information gleaned from local educators, administrators and board of education members will hopefully ensure that the New York State Learning Standards are relevant and effective. The current standards will remain in force until the New York State Learning Standards are developed and implemented.

2. **CURRICULUM.** Local school districts will once again design and select their own curriculum. The state will continue to have models and templates that districts may use to inform their local educational programs and practices. There will be no New York State Curriculum. There will however (if the task force recommendations are carried out) be professional development provided to support the new approach and particular attention will be paid to preventing jettisoning valuable information and professional development provided to date in implementing the Common Core Learning Standards. Both in the standards and in new curricula, the focus on revisions will be on the early elementary grades.
3. **TEACHER EVALUATIONS.** Until a new system of evaluation is phased in, student test scores will be used only in an advisory capacity. Student test scores from the Grade 3-8 ELA and Math tests (which are still required under the new federal law, but which the state may now have greater discretion in designing) will not be used to evaluate educators. A new system of teacher evaluation is expected to be in place by the 2019-2020 school years, allowing three years for the state to perfect a more workable approach.
4. **STUDENT TESTING.** The task force is recommending that both the number of school days used for testing purposes and the length of individual tests be reduced. A standardized test primarily used to assess the strength of schools and the performance of demographic subgroups (students in poverty, ELL students, etc.) will be only one day in duration, according to the report. Standardized testing under the task force's recommendation, would be once per school year and only one day in length. Standardized tests will be written with input from teachers and administrators and will include information gleaned from post-test student responses.

The State Education Department is also immersed in its own assessment of the Common Core and testing. Though its report is not due until June, there is an expectation that it will issue preliminary recommendations soon, to work in conjunction with the Common Core Task Force report and allow changes to be supported by the necessary legislative action and state budget funding. Both at the state and federal level, responsiveness to concerns about the lack of practicality in the current approach appears to be comprehensive. Your Rural Schools Association will continue to provide you analysis as more information comes to light.



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