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RSA NEWS

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RSA ON THE MOVE!

Hi folks,

To say that changes are afoot at your Rural Schools Association is a dramatic understatement! First, in selecting me as your new Executive Director, your board of directors

signaled a need for advocacy to take center stage in our list of services. Our rural schools comprise nearly half of all the schools in our state. They are the lifeblood of so many of our communities and the link to a healthy economy. Yet, sadly the way our state treats those schools is inequitable. To address that, RSA has taken on the new role of championing the cause of our rural school districts to the governor, state legislature, Board of Regents and our federal representatives. I believe that my career to date has prepared me well to lead you in an effort that has already begun! Your RSA Board of Directors met in retreat this fall, where (among other important work) they focused on creating the RSA Legislative Agenda for 2015. You can read about it later in this issue!

That new focus on advocacy required us to locate ourselves closer to the legislative and regulatory action. With the help of our partners at the New York State School Boards Association, I am proud to say that the Advocacy Office of the Rural Schools Association is open and doing business! We are located in Suite 200-A at 24 Century Hill Drive in Latham, 12210, on the second floor of the NYSSBA building. NYSSBA was kind enough to lease us this space at below market rates and includ-



Albany Advocacy Office in Full Swing!

ed the ability to use their conference space. Our new Advocacy Office phone number is (518) 250-5710 and my email address is dal295@cornell.edu. Please contact me whenever you feel I can be of help, or when you have information you think will help bring home our message to state and federal leaders.

But that's not the only change afoot! Adding advocacy to the services provided by RSA doesn't mean we've dropped any of our other member benefits! In fact, our offices at Cornell will shortly be upgraded as well. While we have always appreciated our office space on campus, its location has had its disadvantages (as it is separated from our other community focused academic partners.) In January we will occupy new offices that will join all of those partners, allowing us to be much more collaborative. Our longtime friend and board member Dr. John Sipple will be next to us. The offices will be in a prominent location on campus and we are thrilled to have space that will facilitate a new spirit of partnership between RSA and Cornell. As in all things, the move will be led by our own Natalie Mitchell. As I begin my service to rural schools, I've found Natalie's knowledge and insight to be incredibly helpful. She's helped reorient me to the world of academia and the history of how RSA operates. I've quickly come to recognize (as so many of you predicted) that Natalie is a tremendous resource in her own right. I'm grateful for her daily help and guidance. Now, as she leads us into our new space, she can tell her new boss where to go, too!

One last change and note of thanks: Dr. Bruce Fraser's retirement as Executive Director doesn't mean we're losing his skill and expertise! Bruce is now our Western New York Regional Representative and will be serving our member needs in that area. Bruce's wisdom led RSA to position itself for the new focus on advocacy for rural school districts and I am grateful for his work (not only while he served as Executive Director, but during the transition to my taking the helm.) Thank you, Bruce! That transition would not have been possible without the additional help of Interim Executive Director, Tom Marzeski. Tom's knowledge and level headed approach have made this period of change not only possible, but enjoyable. His thorough and collaborative efforts have allowed RSA to remain effective even while I got my new legs under me. Tom is a gentleman and a true professional. He now returns to his regularly scheduled duties as Deputy Executive Director and I couldn't ask for better help.

Well, that about covers who and where we are these days! Now let's move on to what we're doing!

A VISION FOR YOUR RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

Now that RSA's Board of Directors has selected its new leadership and set its direction, members need to know their association's vision for the future. At its recent annual retreat, the board and new Executive Director Dave Little arrived at that shared vision:

***ADVOCACY FOCUS:** RSA's vision is to add significant advocacy on behalf of member districts to its array of member services. Rural schools are frequently politically marginalized and underfunded. In response, RSA will seek to educate leaders on the impact of proposals on rural schools and to inform them of methods of helping improve educational opportunities in rural communities. It will do this by providing authoritative information, presented in a professional way. RSA will regularly attend meetings of the Board of Regents and the state legislative education committees, hold meetings with state leaders and key staff and provide written reports, reactions to regulatory proposals and legislative bill memos. RSA will analyze the Executive Budget and the enacted State Budget, as well as issue veto requests of legislation when warranted. RSA will also provide an analysis of legislative activity from a rural school perspective at the conclusion of the legislative session.

Within the educational community, RSA intends to work collaboratively with partnering associations to advance the general interests of public education. This work will include producing research reports, joint advocacy statements and testimony at legislative hearings.

***INCREASE VISIBILITY:** In order to be influential in educating state leaders to the rural school perspective, RSA must become regularly visible. This can be accomplished through issuing press releases on relevant issues, letters to the editor, releasing reports and studies, as well as serving as a spokesperson for radio, television and the print media. RSA will be a regular presenter at educational conferences and forums, meet with business and higher educational leaders, in addition to providing members with periodic webinars and video clips related to timely issues. Staff is already engaged in extensive travel to meet the demands of increased requests for local Rural Schools Association presentations.

***INCREASE MEMBER OUTREACH:** Your Rural Schools Association plans to increase communication with you by providing you regular issues of Albany Alerts and Washington Watch (where we will let you know about important governmental proposals with the potential of affecting your rural district.) We intend to expand the number of people who receive information from RSA to include all administrators and staff, as well as board of education members. RSA will also produce a "Who We Are" video to let folks know the programs and services available through RSA. We'll also begin planning regional forums to make it easier for you to attend RSA events. Finally, we'll make every effort to come to your district personally whenever you feel we can help.

***EXPAND PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES:** One of the most effective ways to increase the recognition of rural school issues is by partnering with organizations that hold similar positions and have like interests. Those kind of partnerships can be temporary around a single issue or they can be longstanding. Our rural schools are closely aligned with business interests, economic development issues and the higher education and military aspirations of our students. RSA will begin reaching out to groups representing those issues and building strong mutual support.

***MAXIMIZE THE CORNELL CONNECTION:** The partnership between the Rural Schools Association and Cornell University is historically and programmatically important for our rural schools. RSA is part of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the Department of Developmental Sociology at Cornell. It is also a member of the Community and Regional Development Institute. Each of these partnerships affords RSA the opportunity to serve students and its member districts through programs, services and research. Your association intends to increase the use of paid and credit bearing programs for student interns to increase the level of information, research and services we provide to you. RSA also plans to be a full partner in the efforts of these groups to ensure that both they and our rural schools receive their full benefit.

***EXPAND THE GEOGRAPHIC FOOTPRINT:** In the big picture, the interests of rural schools in New York State aren't that different from other rural schools in the Northeast. Funding, enrollment and economic stagnation affect us all. Once RSA has firmly established its new efforts, we will begin to reach out to organizations and institutions in surrounding states so that we might identify common issues and concerns and arrive at shared approaches. There is strength in numbers and together, we can have a louder voice and a stronger presence for rural schools by collaborating with our neighbors.

THERE YOU HAVE IT! Ambitious, strategic, highly visible and relevant. That's your new Rural Schools Association! If you have suggestions for additional ways we can carry out this vision or if you have information you know will be helpful in our efforts to educate leaders, please be sure to contact us.

The phone number for the Albany Advocacy Office is (518) 250-5710.

The email address for RSA Executive Director David Little is dal295@cornell.edu.

RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK STATE

Communities Committed to Educational Excellence

2015 Legislative Agenda

1. **ELIMINATE THE GEA!** The state of New York now has both a structural surplus and a multibillion dollar windfall in the bank. Under these conditions, can there be any reason to continue an unconstitutional statutory deduction from school funding? If the gap no longer exists, why do our schools continue to endure a Gap Elimination Adjustment? While the state has made incremental improvements in aid during the past two years, rural school districts have been starved for resources. They are not only the most vulnerable (given their fragile local tax base) but they have been inequitably treated in the application of the GEA.

The time has come to make amends for having ignored the court ordered state aid settlement. The GEA must be eliminated and a transparent, equitable and sustainable funding formula must be enacted. The funding formula created in 1999 serves as a workable model, with adjustments for changes needed for loss of enrollment and local property wealth incurred during the recession. No longer can this state tolerate a formula that is manipulated, frozen, deducted from or includes an artificial “floor” that fails to recognize accurate degrees of poverty. If the state is to utilize a school funding system that relies on local property taxes to offset its cost, it must do so in a manner that accurately adjusts for a community’s actual ability to contribute; not on the political implications of change!

In 2015 it will take no less than an increase in state aid of \$1.2 billion to simply provide the same level of programs and services our schools currently provide. It will take an additional amount to eliminate the GEA and yet an even greater investment to address issues associated with English Language Learners and unaccompanied minors and regional services. Beyond that, the state must make a concerted effort to provide an expanded curriculum in our rural schools, so that rural students are not at an academic disadvantage in their efforts to become college and career ready. Too much, you say? Hardly. The state has steadily decreased its contribution to educational funding over the past several years. Its reliance on local taxpayers to pay for its constitutional responsibility to provide a sound, basic education to all students now ranks New York State among the worst in the nation for equitable funding. It pays only 34% of educational costs, while local taxpayers foot 60% of the bill. If New York State would only return to the percentage it paid a decade ago, our rural schools could not only provide their usual high level of success, but they could do so across the range of courses needed for success in today’s academic and business environment. It’s time.

2. **NO TUITION TAX CREDITS!** Rural schools adamantly oppose legislative efforts to divert desperately needed funding to nonpublic schools through Tuition Tax Credits. If the

State of New York cannot afford to fund its existing system of public schools, how can it possibly attempt to fund nonpublic and parochial schools? The current proposal to provide tuition tax credits is fraught with inequity and vagueness. It includes no income limits on those who might take advantage of the credits, makes no attempt to target those in need, those trapped in poorly performing schools or children with special needs. It does not limit the amount one individual might take as a credit. It ignores the fact that our rural school districts do not have taxpayers capable of funding increases, let alone donors capable and eager to provide private funds to public schools. As a result, wealthy public schools will benefit from the public portion of the tax credit proposal. Private and parochial schools will benefit from wealthy donors. Rural schools will suffer from the loss of revenue otherwise available to the state for distribution through state education aid. Tuition tax credits are poor public policy.

3. **NO CHARTER SCHOOL CAP INCREASE OUTSIDE URBAN AREAS!** While the success of charter schools varies widely, they continue to proliferate. The state's students would be better served by providing traditional public schools with the mandate relief afforded charter schools, rather than creating a second school system, publicly funded but privately run. As the state approaches its limit on the number of charter schools, it should be strategic in its approach to any increase. In urban areas, charter schools may offer relief from intractable performance issues experienced by traditional public schools. In rural areas however, charter schools could only hope to duplicate a high degree of academic success already experienced by our schools. New York State can ill afford the luxury of offering a second public school system in locations it has historically underfunded. The blow of underfunding our rural schools, combined with siphoning off funds to an unnecessary charter school would prove a death knell for financially struggling rural schools. Any increase in the allowable number of charter schools must be limited to locations experiencing historically low academic success rates.

Better still would be to keep the allowable number of charter schools at the existing level, while providing rural schools the legal flexibility to duplicate the advantages of charter schools. This mandate relief experiment would allow rural schools to extend the school year and the school day, increasing academic performance and relieving the social pressures of teen drug and alcohol abuse and teen pregnancy attendant to the lack of out of school activities experienced in rural communities. The state would also be well served by a concerted effort to fund and facilitate the provision of regional academic programs and services needed to provide rural students the breadth of curricula required to meet current post secondary expectations.

4. **GIVE SCHOOLS THE TOOLS!** If the recession showed us anything, it's that the use of reserve funds is a vital component in good public stewardship. Far from an extravagance, reserve funds prevented the outright bankrupting of our public educational system during our recent time of financial crisis. The old argument that increasing the allowable

fund balance would lead to tax hikes is irrelevant in the tax cap era. Fund balance is not built into a school budget, its money left over from unplanned events (like retirements and decreased use of expensive programs and services.)

Years ago the state allowed municipalities and school districts to create a reserve fund for its employees: Just not its instructional employees. As a result, schools have reserve funds to offset dramatic increases in the cost of retirement system contributions for everyone but teachers. The obvious problem is that teachers make up the bulk of those contributions. New York State needs to treat all school employees equally, so that schools have the means to cope with spikes in retirement system costs. In the past decade, those costs have gone from no school district contributions at all, to a current rate of over 17% of payroll! The state's reaction to the recession was to cut state aid and force school districts to pay double digit pension increases, while laying off large numbers of staff. If our schools had been allowed to keep a Teachers Retirement System (TRS) reserve fund, many of those jobs could have been saved. By failing to allow it, the state made the conscious choice to jettison thousands of employees; creating a devastating educational and economic impact on rural students and the communities that support them.

It doesn't have to happen again. We can be ready for the next recession by allowing schools to keep a reasonable fund balance to offset TRS costs. It doesn't have to cost the state a dime. Simply eliminate the "smoothing" that is artificially propping up TRS rates at a time when the system has more money than any other time in its history, with fewer employees than at any time in recent memory. Allowing the contribution rate to naturally decline rather than using an average rate of the past five years will free up funding to create the reserve and prepare our schools for the next inevitable increase. The result? Sound fiscal planning and the preservation of educational programs and services.

5. **MAKE SCHOOL DISTRICT EMPLOYEE HEALTH CARE REALISTIC!** Communities are paying health care costs for their school employees that they can no longer afford to provide for themselves. The cost of school employee health care, as a result of outdated contractual rules, causes schools to decrease programs and services to students, lay off employees and increase local taxes. It's time for New York to recognize that its failure to act is in itself a decision to accept those losses; all to avoid asking our employees to do what their brothers and sisters in other states have already been doing-namely, contributing a modest amount toward the cost of their health care. New York State needs a law that limits school district contributions to employee health care to 80% of the total cost. This would allow school district funds to be used to educational purposes and provide an incentive for everyone to explore cost efficient health care options.

The alternative is to allow ever escalating health care costs to consume local school resources. The high employee costs will leave schools with only the option to eliminate staff, decrease curriculum options needed for post secondary success, eliminate the guidance and

psychological assistance needed to keep kids safe and help them succeed and to place ever increasing financial pressure on communities. New York State cannot morally choose to simultaneously cap local financial support, cap state support and ignore the means of operating more efficiently! Our state's current approach amounts to the systematic dismantling of our schools.

6. **BRING THE CAP ON BOCES TEACHER REIMBURSEMENT INTO THE MODERN ERA!** Our state has wisely chosen to use a highly effective program of shared educational services called BOCES. Sadly, in recent years the ability of local school districts to send their students to BOCES programs has been severely hampered by the state's financial condition. Just at a time when the need for programs and services provided by BOCES is at its educational and financial peak, the state has chosen to hamstring local school district participation. How? By keeping a BOCES teacher salary cap at the same level it's been for over a generation. Sure local schools get BOCES reimbursement, but only for a fraction of the actual cost of the shared teacher. The result is that they can't afford to use the very service intended to make programs affordable. While this may be an inconvenience for some school districts, it is the lifeblood of our rural schools. Our state must immediately embark on an incremental program of bringing the BOCES teacher reimbursement limit up to its actual cost. Only then will vital programs like CTE and STEM become viable for our students.

7. **EFFICIENCY, SURE! MORE EDUCATION CUTS? NO!** In order to provide local taxpayers with a modest rebate, the state intends to require our schools to cut their tax levy. Let's be clear: The state has already capped state aid. It has already capped local taxes. It has already reneged on its court ordered state aid schedule. While the state's spending has increased by \$13 billion in the last five years, it is still paying school aid at 2009 levels. No increase whatever. Now it wants local school districts to cut their tax levy by 1%. It demands this of rich and poor alike. It demands it without regard to educational consequences for children. It demands it despite its constitutional mandate to provide a sound, meaningful public education to all of its state's students. It is a standard to which it does not hold itself and could not meet if it did. The state makes this demand without providing any guidelines on how this might be accomplished and without providing any relief from the state requirements that prevent efficient operation.

School districts were limiting their tax increases to tax cap levels even before the tax cap was imposed. Local districts have long walked the fine line between educational necessity and local fiscal affordability. State demands for cost cutting without providing any means of accomplishing the task amounts to political posturing at its worst. It pits local communities against their schools for failing to meet this impossible expectation. Want to cut the tax levy by 1%? Uphold your responsibility to increase state aid! Want to cut another 1%? Provide promised mandate relief! Want to cut it further? Support innovative regional and digital delivery of educational programs!

COMMUNITIES COMMITTED TO EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE



Roxbury CSD Students Participating in Civil War Reenactment

In my mind, the fact that exciting educational opportunities are taking place in our rural schools was never in doubt. Just how exciting those opportunities can be was brought home to me during a recent trip to Roxbury Central. Superintendent and RSA board member Tom O'Brien had asked me to attend the ribbon cutting on a tremendous collaboration between a private donor, the community, school district and the state. To make a thrilling story way too short, a Roxbury alum had recognized the value of the lessons learned while attending the district more than a half century ago. He donated a large sum to the district toward the creation of a community technology center that now proudly occupies a corner of the main building. His generosity spurred additional community and school staff donations of time and money. The state kicked in the appropriate building aid and there we were, cutting the ribbon on a high tech center, open to students and community members alike. I was honored to represent RSA at the event.

The lessons I learned that day were both many and varied. First, I was stunned that such a remote community (where I couldn't place a cell phone call) could host such a "next generation" learning center. I was encouraged that this rural school had the community spirit and determination to coordinate all of the myriad tasks needed to bring together the utilities, community

volunteers, architectural planning, maintenance staff, technical advice and educational expertise needed to determine how such a unique center would function. It truly was exhilarating to sit in the gym and see the enthusiasm on the faces of students and staff, the pride of the board of education and administrators, the support of the community members. It was a shared victory over the stacked odds that challenge all of our rural schools. My second reaction that day was that Roxbury is providing a great model for us all; schools, community, business and government collaborating to create wonderful educational opportunities for kids.

As I came down the hill into Roxbury, it had been instantly clear to me that whatever great things were transpiring were happening under conditions that epitomize so many of our rural communities. Roxbury is remote; even isolated. It is small and it is challenged. The school is the hub of the community and there is tremendous pride in it. Pulling into the school parking lot, the pending ceremony was not what struck me, however. That's because the ribbon cutting was not the only item on the school agenda that day. In fact, the other high profile activity was hard to ignore, as there were two armed encampments on the ball field! Civil war re-enactors had set up camps under the Stars and Stripes as well as the Stars and Bars. Fully uniformed sergeants were drilling their student troops on a bitterly cold day (complete with rifle volleys) interspersed with breaks around a large impromptu campfire. They were preparing for a mock battle that afternoon. The diversity of instruction between the new high tech learning center and Civil War drills was not lost on me. Localized, interactive and immersive learning, combined with the global educational opportunities afforded by digital connections; all in one day, all in one rural school.

It was a great lesson two weeks into my tenure as your executive director and advocate. This was what we could be. This is how we could accomplish it. Before I spoke to the assembly that day, I had already been inspired enough to arrive at my personal, unofficial motto for the Rural Schools Association. It will become the tagline on my emails and you'll find it as the headline of this article: **Communities Committed to Educational Excellence**. That's what our rural schools embody. That's what sets us apart from others along the educational spectrum. In rural education, from the days when everyone pitched in to hire an itinerant schoolmarm for the one room schoolhouse, it's always been about the community taking collective responsibility for their children's education. So while Roxbury celebrated a day devoted to new educational opportunities for their own students, they provided a wonderful example of how we can all work together to bring the world to all our kids. From building connections to business and higher education and from rallying our leaders to free us to reach new heights, helping us all get there is the proud mission of your Rural Schools Association.

2015: WHAT'S AHEAD FOR OUR RURAL DISTRICTS?

On the one hand, the year following a gubernatorial election has historically been a poor state aid year for public education. The theory goes that governors use that first year to restrain spending, safe in the knowledge that they have three years to increase it before their next election. Recall that the year after Gov. Cuomo's first election, he capped both state and local aid to schools, saying that the state was spending an inordinate amount for the results it was producing. Neither the numbers nor the rhetoric were helpful to rural schools. Much has happened since then. The majority in the state senate has shifted from Republican to Democrat, to a shared leadership coalition and back to Republican; all largely based on the public perception of what was provided in school aid. We have endured the Great Recession and now sit atop both a structural state budget surplus and a huge one time financial windfall. We are in the midst of lawsuits attempting to bring the state back to its responsibility to provide for its public educational system (and your RSA is in the middle of that effort.)

For as long as any of us can remember, state aid has been both overly complicated and inappropriately based on political, rather than educational considerations. We remain mired in a system designed to take funds from public education, rather than support it. Collectively we spend more than any other state, per student, but because the state passes two thirds of the funding costs onto local taxpayers, we mask tremendous disparities in the education of our state's children. Will the state surplus of funds allow us to rectify this travesty or will the looming specter of politics continue to override equity? A lackluster gubernatorial campaign allowed legislative races to be decided on local issues and familiarity of personalities. In a mere two years, different effects will influence the outcome. Traditionally, presidential elections will bring out more young voters and in New York State, where one of the candidates will likely reside and who poses the possibility of the first female president, the electorate is likely to be energized. All of this means that incumbent legislators will need to be on firm political ground heading into that election-and in New York State, that means school aid.

So, don't be surprised if the GEA is finally eliminated next year just prior to election, rather than this year. Don't be surprised if the governor's timeline and the legislative timeline do not mesh well. For public education, that means that directives like the plan to have school districts and other municipalities reduce their tax levy by 1% each of the next three consecutive years may be under a microscope. The public is smart enough to recognize that you can't reduce a local tax levy without local control and like it or not, our schools have lost local control over costs. Retirement system contributions are set by the state and hover around 17% of payroll. Changes to health care contributions are blocked by state law and far exceed what can be raised under the tax cap. After half a decade of cuts, school districts have already restrained spending and used up reserve funds. They've laid off staff and cut programs and services. The only real way to reduce the tax levy under those conditions is to increase school aid and the public knows it. Whether New York State rights its foundering educational ship is dependent on state action, not the local tinkering that state law allows. Over the past three legislative elections, the public has shown little patience for business as usual. With money on hand and rural schools pounding on the door, 2015 will either be the year of long awaited equity, or the stage that will be set for wholesale political change. The answer rests in the foresight of our state leaders.

REGENTS TO SET STATE AID PLAN

At their monthly meeting and a subsequent meeting of education community stakeholders, the Board of Regents began work on its state aid plan for 2015-16. The finalized proposal will be submitted to Governor Cuomo and the legislature later this month. RSA is participating in the development of that proposal and can relay the following information:

1. The amount of the Regents' request for state aid will be at least \$2 billion. In the past two state budget cycles, the Regents plan has requested less than the amount ultimately provided by the state. This year's proposal will better reflect district need. Reimbursable aid categories (BOCES Aid, Transportation Aid, Building Aid and Special Educational aids) would be fully funded according to the existing reimbursement formula. Operating Aid (also referred to as Foundation Aid) would be combined with funds to restore the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) into one (wealth based) formula. Since merely continuing existing programs and services will take about \$1.2 billion from the state, full GEA restoration funding will need to push the state aid figure beyond \$2 billion. Regent James Tallon, Regent State Aid Committee chair, believes that simply restoring GEA funding would direct the majority of state aid to wealthier districts. Combining the Foundation Aid and GEA restoration funding into one blended and wealth based category, he says, will direct more of the total funding to districts still on the brink of educational insolvency; by eliminating a high need district's GEA first and then providing Foundation Aid.
2. The state has received a one-time financial windfall of nearly \$5 billion from banking fines received this year. State leaders have been adamant in calling for the funds to be used for permanent (infrastructure) projects, rather than ongoing expenses, like traditional state education aid. Their rationale for this position is that the funds would soon be expended, leaving the state with permanent expenses and no corresponding revenue source. (The reverse of the state mandates that the state typically imposes on school districts.) Possible one time, infrastructure education uses for the settlement windfall would include payment of past due state aid claims already made by districts. (If this plan is not adopted, prior year claims filed this year would not be paid until 2028-2029.) The Regents would also use some of the funds to pre pay school district expenses for Universal Pre-K (including new transportation costs), rather than forcing districts to spend the money up front and await state reimbursement. This would no doubt increase district participation.
3. The Regents also intend to support funding for several new initiatives, including support for Career and Technical Education pathways to graduation, support for English Language Learners, support directed to districts experiencing a surge in immigrant student enrollments (particularly unaccompanied minors), support for Regional Secondary Schools and additional support for expanding regionalized services. The Regents also plan to request an increase in the cap on aid for BOCES teacher salaries. The cap hasn't been raised since the 1990s. The plan would bring the cap to full reimbursement within three years. This is an RSA legislative priority.

As your Rural Schools Association advocates for sufficient state aid, provided through an equitable and useful method, we will provide you with the updates and expert analysis that will allow you to effectively add your district's voice to the discussion.

The following story was posted this week on the State of Politics blog, a feature of Time Warner's Capital Tonight.

U.S. Education Department to Investigate NY Education

Funding Concerns

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights will be investigating complaints brought forth by two New York school districts that say the state's funding structure for public schools discriminates against districts with high concentrations of people of color, students whose first language is not English, and students with disabilities.

According to a press release from the Schenectady City School District, this will be the first time the OCR considers a complaint of this kind from a school district.

The complaints were originally brought forth almost a year ago by the superintendents of Middletown City School District and Schenectady City School District.

The OCR first responded that they could not go forward with an investigation because it did not have jurisdiction over some of the parties involved in the complaint. The complaint is against New York state, the state legislature, Governor Andrew Cuomo, Comptroller Tom DiNapoli, the state Board of Regents and the state Education Department.

Now, the investigation will move forward, focusing on the Board of Regents and the Education Department, since the OCR has jurisdiction in those areas.

In the press release, both superintendents said that while this investigation is a good step forward, they're disappointed in the "lack of response from elected leaders" in New York over what they say is a racial disparity.

Home-grown smarts: Farm to School effort offers agricultural, educational options

PUBLISHED: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2014 AT 12:30 AM

Imagine having a farmers market every school day in Watertown.

No, the renowned event held each Wednesday during the summer months on Washington Street is not expanding its operations.

But residents are now working to bring locally grown produce to students at Watertown City School District by next year.



Watertown City High School

The Farm to School Program, operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, enables farms to supply schools with necessary food items like fruits and vegetables. It's a unique way to support local farms and increase awareness of where the food that students consume comes from. The goal is to have the program established in Watertown schools by the beginning of the 2015-16 academic year.

“Across the country, an increasing number of schools and districts have begun to source more foods locally and to provide complementary educational activities to students that emphasize food, farming and nutrition,” according to information from the USDA. “This nationwide movement to enrich children’s bodies and minds while supporting local economies is often referred to as ‘farm to school.’ The term encompasses efforts that bring local or regionally produced foods into school cafeterias; hands-on learning activities such as school gardening, farm visits and culinary classes; and the integration of food-related education into the regular, standards-based classroom curriculum.”

“Watertown schools food service directors have committed that by January 2015 they will be able to meet and decide what food product they want to order and how much per school building,” Lara T. Abreu, co-organizer of the Watertown City School District Farm to School campaign, was quoted as saying in a story Sept. 30 in the Watertown Daily Times. “Right now we’re focusing on meeting with local farmers, creating dialogue and educating teachers, and providing resources.”

By building support for this program through the district’s administration and school board, Mrs. Abreu and members of her committee have accomplished a tremendous feat. And for that, they deserve a great deal of credit and the community’s gratitude.

Steven W. Ledoux, community educator/Local Food & Farmers Market/Nutrition & Health with Cornell Cooperative Extension's Jefferson County office in Watertown, is helping with the Farm to School effort. He said farms wishing to participate are working toward completing USDA Good Agricultural Practices audits to be officially certified.

A GAP audit entails a visit to farms to ensure they adhere to specific practices while processing food. Certification demonstrates that any risk of contamination is minimized because these farms implement the best known procedures for cleanliness.

GAP audits are conducted on behalf of the USDA by representatives of the state Department of Agriculture & Markets, said department spokesman Joe Morrissey. While certification is not necessary to provide food to local schools as part of this program, being certified would assure district officials and parents that the farms providing food conform to USDA standards, Mr. Ledoux said.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, though, is receiving input on potential revisions to the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2011, Mr. Ledoux said. This could affect requirements for the GAP audit, and so farmers must wait to see how process will be affected, he said.

Despite this delay, organizers should proceed with implementing the Farm to School Program in Watertown and other local districts. It's a great way to expose the farming community in Northern New York to new markets, provide students with nutritious food and offer educational opportunities about how the agricultural industry benefits us all.

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