Successful Rural Schools Winter Conference

The New York Rural Schools Program (RSP) and Rural Schools Association (RSA) held its first annual Winter Conference in Newark, New York. Partnering with the NY Four County School Boards Association, attendees from throughout the Finger Lakes heard from a national efficiency expert and from four innovative programs being offered currently in school districts. Titled Better People-Better Programs, the morning portion of the conference focused on improving personal traits for rural school leaders, while the afternoon concentrated on presenting easily replicable programs to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of rural educational programs. Topics ranged from adult educational programs (and school to work programs) to project based learning being done in the state’s new P-Tech High Schools. Folks also learned about how schools can make the most of the state’s new learning standards and how interdisciplinary cooperation between subjects is allowing some schools to achieve unexpected academic gains for their students. The keynote speaker was Tyler Enslin, who worked interactively with the group to create a new personal approach to their work. Enslin specializes in instructing professionals in creating personal habits that maximize results and improve the possibility of success for personal goals.

In March, RSP and RSA will once again combine to host a summit; this time in Albany, to be held in conjunction with the New York State Council of School Superintendents’ annual Winter Institute.
Twenty-five years after it was created as part of the Annenberg Challenge to improve public education, the Rural School and Community Trust is moving in with the AASA, the School Superintendents Association.

Robert Mahaffey, the executive director of the Rural School and Community Trust, will continue to lead the organization as it enters into a "partnership" with the national superintendents' group. The Trust's board of directors will also remain intact, and funding will remain separate.

Representatives from the two organizations said the partnership—in which the Trust will operate as a kind of subsidiary of the AASA—will allow both organizations to play off each other's strengths and expand their reach. They will also formally be able to collaborate and pursue joint opportunities, including grants, together.

Nearly 70 percent of the AASA's superintendents hail from rural districts. And the Trust has a tremendous amount of research and expertise in rural education and rural communities that the AASA currently doesn't have, said Noelle Ellerson Ng, the associate executive director for policy and advocacy at the AASA. The two groups already collaborate on things like teacher recruitment and training in rural schools and school leadership development initiatives in rural areas, Mahaffey said.

"It's just a great natural fit," Mahaffey told Education Week. "We have school superintendents in rural places who are the bedrock of the delivery of education services to our rural students, and supporting their communities. This seems like a marriage made in heaven as they say."

"We are very excited about the prospects," he continued. "We know that we are going to be able to provide services, and supports, advocacy, and policy work for rural children, families, and communities across the country. We view this as a tremendous opportunity."

The Rural School and Community Trust's network of consultants and professional-development providers will provide their expertise to the AASA, Mahaffey said.

The Trust has its roots in a $46.75 million grant from the Annenberg Foundation, part of the philanthropy's $500 million
grant program to improve public education.

More than 9 million students attend rural schools, according to the 2017 publication of "Why Rural Matters," a report by the Trust on the state of rural education. And rural schools educate a complex mix of students from different races, ethnicities, and income levels. High transportation costs, college and career access, and the lack of widespread high-quality early-childhood programs continue to be challenges, according to the report.

AASA approached The Rural School and Community Trust about joining forces. When the AASA refreshed its goals earlier this year, expanding support for rural superintendents, including through networking opportunities, conferences, research, and advocacy, was added as a priority, Ng said. The respective boards approved the partnership in October.

"It was an alignment of opportunities that were mutually beneficial," she said.

Dan Domenech, the AASA’s executive director, said: "Through this partnership, our organizations will leverage each other's mutual efforts and supports for rural superintendents to offer a multifaceted set of resources, including networking, advocacy updates, professional learning, webinars, reports and more."

The partnership comes at a time when rural communities and concerns are attracting increased national attention after rural voters played a pivotal role in the 2016 presidential election. The election shined a light on rural communities, their experiences, challenges, and concerns. Similarly, rural schools also need attention, Ng said.

"If we can ensure that students in rural areas have opportunities that are equitable to those in higher-resourced areas, that's only a boon to our nation's economy," she said.

Editor’s Note: Your RSA partners with both of the national associations listed in the article above. Our National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition receives staffing support from AASA’s Governmental Relations team. The National Rural and Community Trust has been a resource to RSA both at the national and state level. Its Executive Director, Rob Mahaffey presented their signature research paper Why Rural Matters at our summer conference last July. The partnership of the two organizations should mean even more information, advocacy and assistance to RSA as we serve our members.

By Denisa R. Superville

PDF Available Here: https://cardi.cals.cornell.edu/sites/cardи.cals.cornell.edu/files/shared/documents/RSA/reapwhatleasneedtoknowinfy2018slidespresentation%20%2801%28002%29.pdf

REAP website: https://www2.ed.gov/programs/reapsrsa/eligibility.html
November 8, 2017

Senator James Seward
Chair, Senate Committee on Insurance Room 403 – Capitol
Albany, New York 12247

Dear Senator Seward:

On behalf of all the groups below, as well as the students, families and staff of our many school districts and BOCES we would like to extend our sincere thanks for your tireless leadership and advocacy regarding the small group health insurance issue. Your commitment, concern and persistence resulted in the enactment of Chapter 370 of the Laws of 2017 that extended the protections for our districts and BOCES for one additional year until December 2019.

This issue is of great importance to all of our organizations and those we represent because most school districts and BOCES participate in either a Health Care Consortium or Trust as an important way to reduce health care costs. Chapter 370 allows districts and BOCES with between 51-100 members to remain in these Consortiums and Trusts for one additional year and allow time for a more permanent solution to be achieved.

As you know, if small districts and BOCES with between 51-100 members are forced out of these Consortiums in the future, the impact would be very problematic, as they would likely have to pay significantly more for health insurance coverage for their employees. It is important to note also that this change would not only impact the districts that would be forced to leave their Consortiums, but also all remaining districts because they too would need to compensate for the loss of these members. Perhaps our greatest concern however is the impact that this change would have on our students: Because of the financial pressure school districts are already operating under, based in part on the imposition of the tax cap, many districts would not have the ability to absorb these projected cost increases without cutting programs and services for our students.

It is for all these reasons that we are both relieved and grateful for your efforts to resolve this issue on a temporary basis. We look forward to working with you in the future on a permanent resolution to this issue by ensuring that all school districts and BOCES, including those with between 51-100 members, can remain in their Health Care Consortiums and Trusts.

Again, we extend our thanks to you and your staff on helping to resolve this most important issue.

Sincerely,

BOCES Participation in Health Care Consortium or Trust

Your Rural Schools Association frequently partners with other advocates around issues of mutual concern. The need for small school districts to retain the ability to participate in their employee health insurance consortium has made this a high legislative priority, leading to the creation of this coalition. Using this letter as a model, you may wish to contact your legislators, thank them for their willingness to exempt small schools to this point and tell them how important retaining
While being interviewed by a group of *Buffalo News* reporters and editors, John Flanagan, the NY State Senate Majority leader was asked if education was New York State’s top priority. Senator Flanagan, who until recently chaired the Senate Education Committee responded, “*Education is absolutely New York State’s top priority. Absolutely, fundamentally, constitutionally.*” Certainly, our legislators spend more time fighting over school aid than any other topic—but, has education remained a priority for the state over the past twenty-five years? Let’s closely examine that question!

### K-12 Education as a Share of Total State Expenditures

One metric for determining if K-12 Education is a fundamental priority for NY State is to analyze how the percent share of the state’s total expenditure that is returned to local school districts as state aid has changed over time. Expenditure data published annually by the *National Organization of State Budget Officials* show that in 1990 NY State sent 23.8 cents of every dollar the state obtained in revenue back to localities to support K-12 instruction—or hold down local tax rates. In 1990, New York’s support for public education exceeded the US Fifty State Average by 1.3% (or by 1.3 cent spent from every dollar of revenue). Over twenty-five years the percent share of each dollar of New York State revenue returned to local school districts has been reduced by just under a nickel (4.8 cents) per dollar of state revenue. By 2015-16, New York was only sending 19 cents of every dollar taken in as revenue back to local school districts. Benchmarked against the fifty state average—New York had fallen a half-cent below that average. *When an important function like K-12 education receives almost a nickel less of every dollar of state expenditure than it had in the past it is impossible to conclude that K-12 Education has been “Absolutely, fundamentally, constitutionally the state’s top priority!”*

### Trend Not Attributable to Declining Enrollment

Recently, New York State K-12 enrollments have shown a declining trend. Lest NY’s current declining enrollments be cited as an underlying contributor for the State’s declining share of NY State revenue directed to support of local education—we should examine enrollment trends over the past twenty-five years. Notably, enrollment is actually up by forty-two thousand students over the twenty-five-year period of our comparison. *Enrollment decline cannot be cited as the cause for spending almost a nickel less of every dollar on K-12 Education!*
Reasons for K-12 Education’s Reduced Share of State Expenditures

A close examination of the National Association of State Budget Officer’s Expenditure Report data makes clear that one governmental function has increased the percent share of state expenditures it represents over the past twenty-five years. Medicaid was supported by 17.7 cents of every dollar of NY State expenditures in 1990. By 2015 Medicare’s share of NY State revenue had grown to consume 31.7 cents of every dollar of state revenue. In fact, Medicare’s growth has “crowded out” funding directed to support five governmental functions (K-12 Education, Higher Education, Public Assistance, Corrections and Transportation) in relation to the share of each dollar NY State revenue each function is allocated. Only the catch all category “Other” joins Medicare in having an increased share of state revenue support. Budgets reflect priorities and it is clear that K-12 Education has not been New York State’s “top priority” over the past twenty-five years!

Another Set of Data Calls into Question Whether Education is NY State’s Top Priority

New York spent just under $66 billion dollars supporting K-12 Education during 2015-16. Unfortunately, about 53% of
that money was generated through the highly unpopular, local property tax—with only 44.2% of the funding coming as state aid. Looking at another set of data we note NY State ranked thirtieth (at 44.5%) when comparing the share of total K-12 Education costs supported by state aid. This means NY State falls below the US average (46.4%). Neighboring Vermont funds education with over 87% of the costs paid for through state aid. With NY State providing education through approximately 675 local school districts—and those districts have wide variations in the property wealth and income behind every student funding equity issues emerge when the state is not a full partner in funding K-12 Education!

Shouldn’t New York State Become A “Full Partner” In Funding K-12 Education

It is clear that New York State is committing a smaller share of the revenue it obtains to supporting K-12 Education expenditures than it has in the recent past. Over the past twenty-five years we have seen K-12 Education’s share of New York’s expenditures decline by almost a nickel of every dollar the state spends. This trend has contributed to higher property taxes being paid by homeowners at the same time districts were reducing staff and curtailing program offerings. It has been a difficult time to be a school board member in NY State—trying to explain annual budgets that cut staff and programs but called for large property tax increases. The evidence is clear that New York State has not been a full partner in supporting local schools over the past twenty-five years. New York State residents send larger amounts of money off to Albany every year—and see fewer cents of every dollar returned to support their local school district. In response to burgeoning discontent from taxpayers New York State imposed the Local Property Tax Cap. The ECASB points out that the solution to local property taxes is for New York State to become a full partner in funding local schools—moving promptly over the next several budget cycles to where state funds support a full fifty percent of K-12 Education costs statewide. This will be a multi-year goal—but if legislators are going to claim education is their top priority we should expect to see significant progress toward a “Full Partnership” each year!
Seneca Falls CSD Students Show Appreciation For The BOE

Seneca Falls CSD shared the video below that one of their high school classes produced for BOE Appreciation Week. It serves as a great tribute and appreciation for the work that Boards of Education do for students.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-Jl2fEOFkOcSGlrNDh0bWJfZG8/view?ts=59f7ce66

RSA was the featured presenter at the Allegany-Cattaraugus Association of School Boards’ annual legislative breakfast. The event included student musical performances. Guests included Senate Finance Committee Chair and RSA award winner Sen. Cathy Young.

RSA Executive Director Dave Little was a guest on Long Island News Radio’s Spotlight on Long Island Schools, hosted by William Floyd CSD Board President Bob Vecchio. The topic was the impact of state funds on Long Island’s rural and fiscally challenged schools. A link to the show will be provided when the episode airs.
CARDI Involvement

While some staff were at the Winter Conference, others stayed home to attend a CaRDI conference titled *State Austerity and Local Fiscal Stress: Evidence from Wisconsin, Michigan, and New York.*

Professor Mildred Warner opened by summarizing some ideas from her ongoing *Creative Responses to Fiscal Stress Project* that has been examining phenomena at the national, local and citizen levels. She shared a metaphor about a frog in a pot: when a frog is put in a pot of water, and the heat is slowly increased, the frog adjusts to the temperature, bit by bit, until it gets too hot, but at that point, the frog does not have the energy to hop out and save itself. Similarly, what we see with some responses to fiscal stress is a gradual erosion of our ability to recover, and the worry is that once we realize this, we may no longer have the resources required to recover.

In NY, we are seeing an industry shift toward “eds and meds” or educational and medical institutions, which is causing most of the state outside of New York City to suffer, as populations migrate from rural to urban areas for jobs. Even city centers are not doing well, as wealth is concentrated in the suburbs. In the meantime, state aid has been declining, and the suggestion from the state to engage in service sharing has not been shown to be viable at the local level. This conference explored lessons learned from the examples of Emergency Management in Michigan, and de-unionization in Wisconsin, and some successful strategies in New York State.

Much of the conference was focused on local governments, state interventions, and alternative means of increasing funding without always increasing burden on taxpayers (eg. Privatizing services, or charging fees for public services still requires taxpayers to increase their expenditures; in communities where income levels are on the decline, this is not a viable option).

However, there were some examples involving school districts in financial distress. The Michigan presentation highlighted 4 localities that had utilized state-provided Emergency Managers, and one of these was a school district. Overall, the lesson was that Emergency Managers are to balance the books by any means necessary. To do this, local authorities are stripped of their power, and cuts are made while assets are sold off, without regard to sustainability or impact on people or community. The School-district specific lesson was that this became even more complicated, as school district finances operate much differently than that of municipal government, and thus needed different support.

There is a great deal of materials from this conference on Professor Warner’s website, and I think there is still more to come. Please feel free to go to www.MildredWarner.org/restructuring/fiscal-stress to explore what is most relevant for you.
Solving a Common Challenge

Buying cooperatives help school districts do more with less

Today’s challenges are real: school districts are faced with cumulative budget shortfalls, school funding has been cut and expectations are at an all-time low. Added to the mix is the challenge of all of us trying to do more with less.

The good news is that the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA) has for the past five years endorsed U.S. Communities, a national government cooperative purchasing program, to serve New York State school districts with unique and extended savings on almost any purchases needed in school districts. The other good news is that those who serve students have proven they are willing to do what it takes to preserve education and the student experience—and there is no better time to show off their ability to streamline efficiencies and run departments more effectively with the resources at hand.

One of the easiest ways for educational institutions to do more with less is by utilizing competitively-solicited contracts through a national government purchasing cooperative program like U.S. Communities, which has registered 561 of the state’s K-12 school districts. Just as warehouse retailers save consumers money by buying in bulk, these purchasing alliances unite the collective buying power of governments, schools and nonprofits from across the country. By joining forces, they gain the ability to purchase the same goods and services for less money.

By doing more with less, schools that utilize cooperative contracts are able to attain improved operating results (IOR)—and achieve efficient, fiscally responsible results. These results can save schools thousands, sometimes even more. For example, the Shawnee Mission School District in Johnson County, Kansas, was looking to transform teaching and learning to a digital environment, while at the same time lowering costs, encouraging greater collaboration, revitalizing its print center and reduce its environmental impact. Under the U.S. Communities program, Ricoh implemented a district-wide solution that included replacement of equipment, scanning capabilities and print auditing. The results were impressive. Not only did the district see a 50 percent drop in printing—a hard cost/paper savings of $750,000—there were 90 percent fewer printer service calls and a 90 percent reduction in their carbon footprint by saving more than 5,000 trees.

Through the Acro Service Corporation contract, Maricopa County, Arizona was able to implement a total solution approach for their staffing needs. This new program delivered an immediate 10 percent savings on all new departmental placements, which will result in $150,000 in annualized savings (and another $125,000-plus in savings as original higher priced Contract Labor Personnel naturally transition out of the program). In addition, this new strategy provides faster access to more qualified candidates and reduces the recruiting losses due to the background investigation. Not only did they save money through this cooperative purchasing contract, but solved an important business need.

While this may sound too good to be true, it is important to note that all national government purchasing cooperatives are not created equal. Before working with a cooperative to utilize their contracts, consider these pointers:

Trust those who have walked the walk. Are contracts being solicited by lead public agencies that understand the unique needs of governments, schools and nonprofits? Or by a third party who is further removed from today’s most pressing issues facing the public sector?
**Ensure best value.** Don’t take someone’s word for it: make sure the pricing offered is the best available. The contract should guarantee a “best value” commitment. Regular internal and third-party audits are also recommended to ensure compliance with contract pricing, terms and conditions. This means a small school in New York, for example can pay the same price for a new playground solution as a much larger government entity. Same product, less money. This is true for the purchase of a new chair as well as full turnkey solutions such as implementing a document management and printing solution.

**Contract Benchmarking.** Benchmarking is another valuable tool to validate best pricing commitment and clearly demonstrate overall savings associated with program contracts.

**No Cost to You.** Membership in a purchasing cooperative should be offered without fees or costs to participating public agencies and nonprofit organizations. Registration should be free with no minimum purchase requirements. Programs should also be able to be used as minimally or as frequently as desired.

Uniting the power of many ultimately leverages the buying power of many. Choosing cooperative procurement is just one example of how those serving the public are thinking outside the box to achieve IOR—even in the midst of challenging times.

**NYSSBA Call For Conference Proposals**

**RURAL STRAND**

NYSSBA’s call for conference proposals is out for their fall conference. [https://s3.goeshow.com/nyssba/annual/2018/submission_form.cfm](https://s3.goeshow.com/nyssba/annual/2018/submission_form.cfm)

In order to be considered for the Rural Strand, please submit your applications through their system, and indicate that you wish to be considered for the RURAL STRAND.
Still comparing apples to oranges?

U.S. Communities delivers cooperative purchasing solutions that can’t be matched.

You may think all cooperatives are the same or heard claims that others are just like U.S. Communities. The fact is there are advantages that are unique to U.S. Communities. What sets us apart is our priority to protect the interests of public agencies and our dedication to providing unmatched value through:

- **Commitment by all suppliers** to offer their lowest overall public agency pricing
- Contracts that are **solicited, awarded and updated** by a lead public agency—not the cooperative
- Quarterly performance reviews and annual, independent third-party audits to **ensure contract compliance and performance**

Stop comparing and experience the unmatched value of U.S. Communities. Register today!

Visit us at [www.uscommunities.org](http://www.uscommunities.org)