RSA NEWS
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Communities Committed to Educational Excellence

2015 Joint Legislative Budget Testimony
Testimony Before the
Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
Elementary and
Secondary Education
February 3, 2015
Hearing Room B
Legislative Office Building
Albany, New York

2015 EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSAL
THE IMPACT ON OUR RURAL SCHOOLS

Honored Chairs and Members of the Joint Committee: The economic vitality of our rural communities is essential to New York State’s future. Our rural schools form the foundation of community life in rural areas and their success determines whether our rural communities will prosper or decline. Simply put, our rural schools are critically important to New York State and 2015 is critically important to our rural schools. Here’s what they need to thrive:

1. Eliminate the GEA: Structural state surplus? One time multi-billion dollar financial windfall? There is no further justification for an unconstitutional and destructive deficit reduction mechanism.

2. No diversion of essential funding to private, parochial or charter schools. If the state can’t fund its educational system, it certainly can’t afford to fund others.

3. Allow new charters only where educational performance demands them. In rural areas where academic performance is high but siphoning off state funds would be disastrous, we know that new charters must be authorized only in chronically low performing school districts.

4. Raise the cap on BOCES teacher reimbursement. You haven’t raised it since the 90s and districts need the shared services of BOCES more than ever.

5. Authorize a TRS reserve fund. The state has one, local governments have one, non-instructional school employees have one. Failure to have a reserve fund to offset spikes in TRS contributions makes staying under the tax cap difficult and threatens vital programs and services. We can protect taxpayers from the next recession with this financial tool.

6. Make school employee health insurance realistic. Local taxpayers are paying school health insurance costs that they can’t afford to provide their own families. Schools are cutting educational programs and staff to afford it. Other states have capped school district health care costs. New York State needs to do it as well.

BENEFICIAL EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSALS

The governor’s annual Executive Budget release contained a number of beneficial proposals for rural school districts, including:

1. STATE AID: Typically, Governor Cuomo proposes an increase under his Personal Income Growth Cap, leaving it to the legislature to negotiate a higher aid increase. $1.1 billion is a significantly improved starting point for those negotiations, subject to some Machiavellian strings tied to the offering. While an aid increase of over a billion dollars would be one of the larger school aid increases in recent years, it is a far cry from meeting the very real needs of public education. Given the diminished tax base and low tax cap limits on our rural schools, sufficient state aid, provided in a revised and equitable manner is vital to our success. Here are some factors making state aid so important to rural schools this year:
   A. The state needs to provide $1.2 billion to allow our schools to simply continue providing existing programs and services. This “roll over” cost from the current year to next year is made all the more critical
by the years of cuts and loss of programs and services. As our schools have begun rebuilding, the failure to provide at least a “roll over” aid level would once again destabilize our educational program. In rural areas (where recruitment of competitively qualified teachers can be challenging even in good times) a record of starting and stopping programs not only hurts student performance, but makes the district less attractive to viable teaching candidates. As a result, both the Board of Regents and the Educational Conference Board have called for increases in the $2 billion range. An increase of that size would allow rural schools to further eliminate the Gap Elimination Adjustment, as well as build new Foundation Aid into their financial plans, saving programs.

B. Perhaps even more important than eliminating the GEA once and for all is the prospect of creating a new and legitimate Foundation Aid formula for schools. The existing formula is a bastardization of the once helpful 1999 formula imposed after the Campaign for Fiscal Equity court settlement. That formula drove much of new aid to high need districts; including our rural districts. Sadly, when the Great Recession hit, the state reneged on the court settlement and began freezing and then cutting funds from the formula. Since it was last allowed to run, communities have suffered a loss of property wealth and many districts no longer have the same enrollment levels they had a decade ago. Restarting a working formula is critically important to the future of our rural schools. We need a formula that accurately reflects a community’s ability to contribute to its schools, not one that artificially limits state aid, irrespective of actual poverty.

C. Make no mistake. Simply receiving an adequate one year aid increase is a far cry from the relief needed. Papering over the problems of rural schools with just enough money to make it through one more year of diminished curricula does little to afford our students a competitive future. Their success and the success of their communities rests not on a single year of enough aid to keep struggling, but in doing the hard political work of creating a formula that drives a predictable and sustainable aid level to rural school districts. This would create stability in both the school and the community, as well as immediately providing a competitive curriculum for kids.

2. BROADBAND: The governor has proposed a half billion dollar broadband initiative to bring adequate internet service not only to our schools, but to our students. Digital learning has the ability to redefine rural education and open the world to even the most remote of our schools. With education demanding so much of our students after normal school hours, home internet access is of paramount importance to their ability to compete for admission to higher education and meaningful employment. When combined with the Smart Schools Bond Act, private partnerships and federal E Rate funding, our state is poised to create a tremendous educational opportunity for rural students.

3. 3020-A REFORM. Following years of ignoring the serious issue of inappropriate staff remaining in the classroom out of economic necessity, the governor has proposed an expedited process of removing those who should find a new career. His plan to recalibrate teacher evaluations to place the burden of proof on the employee (to show that the decision to dismiss that employee was inappropriate) has been combined with a new plan to require hearings of those accused of inappropriate behavior toward a student to be conducted within 60 days (those days to be unpaid leave.) Hearings would be conducted by state hearing officers, eliminating the dreaded wait for one of the few mutually acceptable arbitrators. The combined result would be a dramatic improvement in assuring that only appropriate personnel are in our classrooms.

4. PRE-K for THREE YEAR OLDS: The governor proposes small pilot programs of pre-k for three year olds in high need districts. The research behind such a move is well founded; children in the worst environments will improve academically the sooner they are placed in a structured and supportive educational program. The problem of course, is that the governor has yet to propose a viable broad based pre-k program outside of New York City for four year olds and he has insufficiently funded existing educational programs, putting non mandated kindergarten at risk in many districts. The better course would be to establish pre-k for four year olds throughout the state, with funding by the state up front (rather than forcing districts to pre pay the start-up costs of a pre-k program and pray for state reimbursement.) The Regents have proposed using a portion of the nearly $5 billion French banking fine windfall to provide this up front pre-k funding.

5. TENURE: The Executive Budget proposes a new five year tenure track, rather than the current three year timeline. Tenured teachers would be required to have received “effective” or “highly effective” ratings for at least two years. The move would address the incongruent circumstance faced currently by our schools where
tenure decisions may need to be made prior to the teacher receiving their permanent certification (placing the district in the awkward position of needing a costly 3020-a proceeding to remove a teacher that does not have a valid license to teach.) The extended tenure track would not only eliminate this conundrum, but allow a thorough evaluation of performance and qualifications. Ultimately, tenure should be a five year renewable contract between educator and school district.

HARMFUL EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROPOSALS

Our rural schools have waited a long, long time for the chance to make common sense changes. While we support many of these changes (listed above), we recognize the potential harm of several others proposed in the 2015 Executive Budget. Among these are:

A. TUITION TAX CREDITS: Opposition to tuition tax credits for donations to private or parochial schools is a Rural Schools Association legislative priority. Tuition tax credits remove needed funding from existing public schools. They set up a structure that in the future could be used to divert hundreds of millions away from rural school districts, in favor of private, parochial and charter schools. Supporters claim that public schools would be benefitted by allowing individuals to donate to public schools too: What they forget to mention is that high need districts can’t afford to pay for schools now and private donors aren’t lining up to help. Charter schools on the other hand, have a network of donors ready and eager to receive the tax benefits of funneling what would otherwise be state revenue to their privately run enterprises. Other states have a far more equitable approach to tuition tax credits, where they are provided to help special education students, impoverished students and the amount of the credit is limited in both amount and to which parents may receive the credit. New York State has done none of those things. Donations are virtually unlimited, tax breaks are generous and there is no benefit whatever to any class of challenged students. Since New York State apparently can’t support one educational system, it certainly shouldn’t be trying to support two. Here too the governor has linked this plan (backed by conservatives) to the Dream Act that would allow the children of undocumented residents to receive state benefits and eligibility for programs (backed by liberals.) These are important issues that must be examined individually and not linked together for the sake of political expediency.
B. **RAISE THE ChARTER SCHOOL CAP:** Despite having nearly 150 slots still available for charters, New York City is approaching its individual limit. Rather than raise the City’s limit, the governor has proposed raising the overall state limit by 100 schools. This raises the specter of charter schools being proposed in rural areas, where they are not needed from an educational standpoint (as most rural schools already have high graduation rates) and would drain precious limited financial resources from struggling districts. The governor has also proposed removing the frozen cap on the amount local districts pay per student for resident children who attend a charter school. Opposition to these proposals is a Rural Schools Association legislative priority.

C. **MAYORAL CONTROL:** While not immediately applicable to rural school districts, the idea of political officials controlling our schools is troubling. The New York City experiment with mayoral control has resulted in minimal educational gain and a dramatic decrease in public access. Rochester attempted mayoral control, but at least temporarily abandoned the effort when its chief proponent, Mayor Duffy, left office to become Lt. Governor. Our schools must be stable. They can ill afford to be subjected to local political change, where successive mayors might be supportive or not, competent educational administrators or not and programmatic visionaries or not. Mayoral control of public schools is a distraction from the vital work of developing a sound financial structure for all public schools.

D. **RECEIVERSHIP OF FAILING SCHOOLS:** No one questions the need to address our chronically underperforming schools. Many of them are a disgrace and not worthy of a state with a proud history of educational excellence. We have utterly failed a quarter of a million children from these schools in the last decade. Yet, the governor has taken a simplistic and easy approach to this serious problem. Treat schools like a financially bankrupt business, shuttle the superintendent and locally elected school officials to the corner and allow a receiver to make staffing and curriculum changes at will. The public loses the role of democratically elected representatives for their school. The state skates away without providing needed financial resources or addressing any of the underlying causes of the chronic failure. It gets false credit for taking drastic action and ultimately, children attempting to get their education during this turbulent time of takeover forever lose whatever chance they had at academic success in life. This is a classic case of trying to tackle complex, fundamental societal issues with a sound byte and a superficial nod. After generations of neglect, our failing schools deserve better.

E. **APPR REFORM:** The governor has suggested we scrap the local scoring segments of APPR in favor of state imposed scoring bands. So much for even the illusion of local control. Sure the numbers tell us that 38% of our kids are college and career ready, while 99% of our teachers are at least effective. Sure the current system is unsupportable, but the governor’s plan to have outside, independent evaluators is unworkable and he proposes no funding to make it a reality. Until we have a legitimate, effective teacher evaluation system, we cannot use the expedited 3020-a process the governor promises. We applaud the governor for tackling issues that have frightened his predecessors into ignoring them, despite the harm caused to public education. There are education experts who are ready and eager to help craft a workable, effective system of teacher evaluation. They were left out of the original APPR law, to everyone’s detriment. We continue to ignore them at our collective peril.

**WHAT’S MISSING**

1. Guidance on last year’s proposal to pay the local taxpayer’s cost increases for school districts that create a regional plan to reduce spending by 1%. If this unworkable plan has actually been jettisoned as the election year palaver it was, fine. If there is an expectation that school districts will fail to follow through because they have been given no idea of how to succeed as a practical matter, then shame on those who will no doubt claim that failure of taxpayers to receive the benefit is the result of an inability on the part of already tax capped schools to reduce the tax levy even further.

2. A plan to provide required electronic voting machines to school districts. After years of lobbying for extensions, last year the state was required to produce a plan to get the new machines into our schools. They are late in doing so and no funding is included in the Executive Budget proposal. If they require schools to fund this purchase, any benefit of a large school aid increase will be blunted by the need to spend upwards of $100 million on largely unneeded technology.

3. A permanent moratorium on the recalibration of Building Aid. Back a couple of years, the state was sup-
posed to lower the interest rate it pays on Building Aid claims, due to lower market rates paid by schools. Districts were supposed to refinance their debt in response, but many districts didn’t (and don’t) have the resources to undertake a new bonding effort. Advocates have been successful in obtaining a temporary moratorium. Neither a permanent nor a temporary solution were included in the Executive Budget and failure to act will result in unanticipated local costs.

4. **Plans to permanently eliminate the GEA or a new Foundation Aid formula.** Both are long overdue and fundamental to the ultimate success of rural educational efforts. A new Foundation Aid formula cannot be lost in the argument over the amount of this year’s aid package and its tethering to reforms demanded by the governor. Governor Cuomo wouldn’t even provide the legislature with state aid runs. School districts not only don’t know the amount he will approve, they don’t know how he’d allocate it. This jeopardizes negotiations regarding aid distribution and makes the real work of creating an equitable formula next to impossible.

5. **State relief of high cost mandates.** Remember when the tax cap was supposed to come with mandate relief? Schools benefitted from Tier VI, which will someday be helpful, but that’s where it stopped. 3020-A and tenure reform would certainly be helpful and we strongly encourage your acceptance of these measures. However, more helpful would be the state taking over the cost of employee pensions. There is no illusion of local control with this issue. Public education is a state constitutional responsibility and all school employees are in one state pension system or the other. There is no flexibility in the amount of the local district contribution to the employee retirement systems. It’s past time for the state to help local taxpayers by picking up the tab for things they have no control over. They’re state retirement systems and the state, not local communities should be paying for them. Remember when the state made counties pay the full shot for Medicaid? Now that’s been capped and the state has been picking up all increases for the past several years. In most states, local taxpayers pay one third of the cost of public education, with the state picking up the other two thirds. In New York State it’s just the opposite. With the utmost respect, after years of ignoring its promise to link the tax cap to mandate relief, our rural schools encourage major cost shifts from local taxpayers to the much broader state tax base.

Respectfully submitted,
DAVID A. LITTLE, Esq.
Executive Director
Rural Schools Association
Of New York State, Inc.

The Rural Schools Association of New York State is a statewide organization representing the interests of, initiating research for and providing services and information to the small and rural school districts of New York State.

“The calm after the storm: Snows like this have left many districts wondering if snow days will jeopardize their state aid
Rural Schools See A Financial Cliff

By Tim Louis Macaluso

Funding for New York State's public schools has for years been a source of tension between school district administrators, teachers unions, and lawmakers. New York's schools are among the most racially and economically segregated in the country, according to a recent New York Times article.

The problems — not enough funding and inequality in the way money is distributed — prevent many poor districts from meeting state standards for student performance, many people say.

Even the landmark 2006 court ruling in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity case, which said that the state is not meeting its constitutional responsibility to ensure adequate school funding, has not corrected the problems. (Two more lawsuits over school funding have been filed in New York State.)

And though the CFE case was largely about insufficient funding for New York City's schools, rural districts are suffering, too. And many, including some in the Rochester and Finger Lakes region, are near a breaking point.

"The large urban areas have their own unique challenges," says Clark Godshall, superintendent of Orleans-Niagara BOCES. "But you could have urban blight in the cities and everyone knows what that is and they can talk about it. But when a big farm goes under in the rural communities, no one says a word."

Superintendents around the state will listen intently to Governor Andrew Cuomo's State of the State address later this month, though many, including superintendents in local rural communities, are not optimistic that he'll propose significant increases in education funding.

The funding problem is the result of multiple causes. At the center is a twisted and complex set of formulas that are neither well understood, nor steadfastly followed.

"There's over 50 state aid formulas," Godshall says. "There's aid for library books, aid for computer software, and each one is different and you have to aggregate them together to get to how much money you're going to get per year."

Godshall says that he doesn't want to disparage politicians, but that they each have special interests that they support, and that muddies the water for everyone.

"The politicians get involved and they'll decide, 'Let's give them extra money for improving their facilities,'" he says. "We may not need it for that." But districts will go out and spend the funds on a soccer field because it's better than not getting the money at all, he says.

Much of the way the funding is awarded is built around the Combined Wealth Ratio, a measure of
both property taxes and income. But that doesn't always tell a community's whole story.

"What you'll find is that some places have high property values and low income or the other way around," says Rick Timbs, executive director of the Statewide School Finance Consortium. "It turns out that if you're near a lake, a stream, a mountain, or a New York City reservoir, you're going to have high property values. But often the people who live there don't make a lot of money. You have the case of property wealth and income poor."

That can be a huge concern for rural districts due to the irregular nature of property values compared to incomes. Even some communities perceived to be wealthy — Brighton, for example — do not have a high CWR, Timbs says.

The situation gets worse in Livingston County communities including Mt. Morris and Nunda, where the CWR is low and roughly half of the students come from low-income households.

But the uneven relationship between property values and incomes in rural communities and its impact on state aid is only a part of the problem. Shortages in school funding have been exacerbated by the Gap Elimination Adjustment.

Governor David Paterson introduced the GEA in 2010, which basically amounted to cutting financial aid to New York's schools to close a $10 billion state budget gap.

The result has been an economic shell game with schools and education, Timbs says.

"The districts that are hurt the most by the GEA are the high needs, low wealth districts, whether they're urban or rural," Timbs says.

But so far, current Governor Andrew Cuomo hasn't shown much sympathy, and has instead pushed districts to do more with less. He often says that money is not the solution to the state's education problems, and that New York spends more on education than any other state, but gets only mediocre results.

What's not being taken into account, however, is the so-called "hard" costs such as employee health care, transportation, utilities, and escalating building maintenance costs, Timbs says. There are also pension contributions to consider, he says.

**When the GEA and the 2 percent tax cap** enacted on New York's properties are factored into the state aid formula, rural districts are shaken to the core, says Matt Cole, superintendent of Livonia's school district. Cole also leads the Genesee Valley Chief School Officers' Association, a coalition of 22 school superintendents in the region.

In rural communities where property values are lower than average, even an increase in taxes doesn't really help, he says. And austerity to compensate for financial shortfalls can be double-edged, he says.
There's a threshold that every district gets to where you can economically only do so much," he says. "There's only so much cutting away from the classroom you can do."

Cole says that he hasn't been replacing retiring teachers. And instead of hiring a professional to manage school business, transportation, and school facilities, he says that he handles those duties with staff help.

Cole says that rural superintendents struggle with informing parents about the reality of the financial problem, because they don't want parents to fear that their children aren't getting an adequate education.

But the funding problems are leading to larger class sizes, cuts to foreign language classes, and fewer or no advanced placement classes, Cole says, which erode college readiness and placement.

Consolidation of school districts doesn't help, either, says Godshall, of Orleans-Niagara BOCES.

"I've got four districts sharing two superintendents," he says. "What you start to see is the local taxpayer has an issue when they call and want to talk to their superintendent. It's not sustainable."

The situation is so bad for the Keshequa Central School District that its board recently informed administrators that the district will be insolvent in two years, Cole says.

And in small towns, the schools are frequently the lifeblood of the community, he says.

"The economic decay that will happen there as a result of not having a school district strikes me as an assault on their way of life," Cole says.


Shark Tank - Farmer Ingenuity: Tree T Pee

Folks, the following link to the television show Shark Tank was sent to us by our friend Dr. Michael Wendt, Superintendent of the Wilson and Newfane school districts. It is a great illustration of rural culture and values, as well as the kind of innovation and entrepreneurial spirit that we all want to instill in our students. The gentleman pitching his innovation is not well spoken. Early in the presentation he forgets the pitch that he wanted to present to the Sharks. But his earnest and heartfelt explanation of the need and value of the product overcomes the odds. Watch until the end to really get the flavor of his motivation, respect for his father and the work ethic that was instilled in him. This is our goal folks; a clear understanding of the needs of rural areas, respect for those who make our rural communities their life and providing our children the means to prosper in those communities.

http://qpolitical.com/every-shark-turned-one-gave-farmer-fighting-chance/
How to keep young people from leaving New York?

David Hill, dhill@ithacajournal.com | @Ijdavidhill 8:05 p.m. EST December 2, 2014

(Photo: DAVID HILL/Staff photo)

Story Highlights

• Adults need to be aware of messages they send young people about their hometowns, panelists stress
• More young people would like to stay, or return, than many upstaters assume
• Without action, spiral of declining working and child-bearing cohort will accelerate

Dr. John Sipple Presents Useful Findings on Youth Retention and Attraction in New York

1 CONNECT 5 TWEET LINKEDIN COMMENT EMAIL MORE
Upstate New York adults need to pay closer attention to the messages they send to their youths regarding their communities if they want to keep them from leaving when they reach adulthood, demographers told a small gathering Tuesday at Cornell University on retaining young people.

“Youth Retention and Attraction in New York: A Research-based Approach through Student-Community-University Engagement” tackled an issue that has faced much of rural and small-city New York, and other Rust Belt states, for a few generations: the aging population and net out-migration of people in their prime child-bearing and working years.

The presenters focused on how adults can, intentionally or not, begin to influence young people as early as the elementary grades on how they view their hometowns. It can be through general attitudes, level of investment in schools and infrastructure, and enthusiasm or lack of it toward community life.

“A lot of messages that kids get when they’re young ... will shape their behaviors and choices of where they’re going to locate or relocate when they get a chance to be mobile themselves,” said John Sipple, associate professor in the Cornell Department of Development Sociology.

“These messages need to be thought about carefully, because they can have very positive effects on kids and the future of your community, and they can actually have quite deleterious effects on your local community, depending on what that message is.”

Sipple and Heidi Mouillesseaux-Kunzman, a senior extension associate with the Community and Regional Development Institute at Cornell, cited several studies indicating young people in rural New York and other states hear from peers and adults that they have to leave to succeed.

Lack of investment in schools and local government further feed the view that their towns are dying, while educators and parents, if inadvertently, tell the best and brightest students that they have to leave to meet their potential. It feeds a spiral that costs communities young people to support tax bases, take care of the elderly, regenerate the population, and stimulate new ideas and forward thinking.

“This is really a bigger issue of community vitality and sustainability,” Mouillesseaux-Kunzman said.

Tuesday’s event was sponsored by the Community and Regional Development Institute and the Polson Institute of Global Development. It drew about two dozen extension and academic people, as well as community-development and school officials from central New York.

At the very least, adults in communities should acknowledge the issue and ask young people for their views, and give them opportunities to learn local social leadership, the panelists suggested.

One study, published in May by the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, found that half the 40,000 young people surveyed would like to stay in their home communities if they had career opportuni-
ties. It found the top achievers had the most affinity for their hometowns. But 64 percent said they were never asked about how to improve their communities.

How to change? Sipple and Mouillesseaux-Kunzman pointed out an array of perspective-changing programs and organizations. Within Cornell is the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences’ New York State Internship Program, in which qualified students in the college work in internships at for-profit companies, nonprofits and public-sector employers throughout upstate. It began in 2013.

Others include the Pipeline for Progress of the Southern Tier, and 40 Below and The Sandbox in Syracuse. Sipple suggested such young-adult organizations should speak to adolescents and teenagers, as well to build a more accurate view of their communities.

A message of hope was shared by Eve Hens, coordinator of the Genesee County Business-Education Alliance. Among other work, the BEA has a series of summer camps, tours, field trips and job-shadowing opportunities to expose mostly middle-school children to viable local careers, Hens said.

The BEA was begun in 1990 by the business community, with funding also from state government, school districts through the local BOCES, and participant fees, which are kept affordable. Jobs recently explored included aviation, medicine, culinary arts, science, technology and math. Young people visited the county 911 dispatch center as a way to sample law enforcement, and a veterinarian’s office, Hens said.

The BEA also promoted a tech academy in which incoming ninth-graders who stick with it earn an associate’s degree that helps them land jobs such as in the region’s burgeoning yogurt plants, or gives them a start on a bachelor’s degree.

There was also a camp for construction trades, which are well-paying and in demand, she noted. “The youngest plumber in Genesee County is 57 years old,” Hens said. “He has been trying to get an apprentice for years.”

The state comptroller has listed those school districts in varying degrees of fiscal stress.

To see the link click here:
http://www.osc.state.ny.us/localgov/fiscalmonitoring/pdf/schools/2015_SchoolStressList.pdf
High Need Rural School Districts Lead the Way On Growth in Four Year HS Completion Rates (Over Five Years)

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Summary of Table: Despite the impact of Gap Elimination Adjustments over the past five years New York’s High Need Rural School Districts have improved 4- Year HS Completion rates at the highest rate of any Need/Resource Capacity Group.
Education initiative shows great Promise
Christopher Feaver, cfeaver@pressconnects.com | @ckfeaver 6:16 p.m. EST December 5, 2014

Binghamton University hopes to expand Broome County Promise Zone efforts

There are 57 public schools in Broome County. When it comes to the Broome County Promise Zone, Binghamton University wants to be a helping presence in all 57.

“That is our goal,” said Laura Bronstein, dean of the College and Community and Public Affairs at BU. “To be in every single one.”

The Promise Zone is a community partnership among BU, the Broome County Mental Health Department and Broome-Tioga BOCES. It will celebrate its one-year anniversary on Dec. 13.

The effort’s main goals are improving student attendance, boosting academic achievement, fos-
tering family engagement with schools and making it easier for students to access services, said Melinda Kmetz, of Broome-Tioga BOCES, and the director of the Broome County Promise Zone.

“We want to make sure that students’ basic needs are really met. Poverty, hunger. Make sure they are able and eager to learn,” Kmetz said. “In the long term, this will lead to improved graduation rates.”

Currently, five school districts — BOCES, Binghamton, Union-Endicott, Johnson City and Whitney Point — and nine schools overall receive Promise Zone assistance.

Binghamton University officials said they like the synergy afforded by the program, allowing university students the chance to pick up valuable work and life experience through internships while becoming invested in the community. Public school officials, meanwhile, are gushing about the programs being offered.

“I’ve seen so much success in the past year,” said Catherine Kacwenski, the principal at Jennie F. Snapp Middle School in Endicott. “Not only are we looking (to assist) the student academically, but to their socio-economic needs as well.”

Seven BU interns work at Snapp to assist students, in addition to a social worker who serves as program coordinator. Kacwenski said virtually every student at the school has been assisted by the program, and roughly 100 of the approximately 900 students in the school work closely with Promise Zone officials.

At Snapp, the Promise Zone offers several lunchtime activities, such as tabletop games, small-group discussions, character education and one-on-one work with students. There are after-school programs two days a week and “keep it positive” phone calls to parents conducted by Promise Zone workers to let parents know when their child does well in school.

“We don’t work for the school, but we work with the school,” said Kimberly Carboine, 23, a first-year master’s student in social work at BU and an intern at Snapp. “When we meet the students, we see how we can help them and benefit them to be successful in school. Once we have that, then we make connections with the families to get them involved as well.”

So far, about 100 graduate school and undergraduates at BU have taken Promise Zone internships. Most are students pursuing their master’s degree in social work, but interns come from all six BU schools.

**Collaborative effort**

“(The Promise Zone interns and social workers) work very collaboratively,” said Patricia Follette, the Whitney Point school district superintendent. “They really look to do the work that schools see as necessary. They don’t come in with their own agenda.”
The efforts to work closely with the families of the students have been a particularly impressive aspect of the program, she said.

“Families not really looking to be part of the student community have been working with Promise Zone interns and social workers, really looking at how to best support the students,” Follette said.

School attendance is a major focus of Promise Zone programs.

“If kids aren’t in school, none of it is going to matter,” said Luann Kida, the Community Schools Director for the Broome County Promise Zone. “We are working with schools on outreach, finding out the barriers, and then helping families to help solve some of the problems in a way that doesn’t feel punitive. It really is supportive.”

Some of the Promise Zone initiatives include in-school social and emotional support and skill-building activities, family engagement, tutoring and parent mentoring.

After-school and summer programs are also offered. Binghamton High has run a cooking class for students. At Johnson City High, there is an after-school hip-hop dance group for boys.

**History**

The Promise Zone is an extension of two other programs that were funded through grants — the KYDS Coalition and the SHARE Project. The SHARE project worked to reduce school violence and promote mental health, while the KYDS Coalition focused on drug and alcohol prevention.

Those programs allowed BU and Broome school districts to work together in several areas. But when those grants recently ran out, another source of funding was needed.

Stakeholders in the other programs went to Albany to lobby for state funding through a new Promise Zone initiative.

“We had heard about Promise Zones and thought that would be nice, so that we didn’t just drop off the cliff with all that we were doing with this multi-million-dollar grant,” Bronstein said. “We saw an opportunity to take our work to the next level.”

There are three other Promise Zones in New York state: Syracuse, South Buffalo and New York City. Those focus primarily on inner-city students. But Broome was able to sell a need to service students throughout the county.

Each school district has its own full-time coordinator, usually a social worker. They oversee interns and work closely with the school administration to focus on key problems that have been identified.

“Really, right now what we are doing is trying to build an infrastructure,” Kmetz said. “Put coordi-
nators in place. We didn’t want to overstretch ourselves. What we hope to do is show our community ... by working together, and putting coordinators in place, bringing resources to the school, that will make children better ready for college, work, more engaged in the community.

“One once people can see what we can achieve, people will start buying into it more and commit more resources.”

The Promise Zone receives $416,000 annually from the state through the county mental health department. The university and BOCES also provide further funding efforts.

Of course, to expand the Promise Zone footprint into every school in the county, considerably more funding is needed.

Binghamton University has conducted several fundraisers of varying sizes, including a mega-bash on election night at the University Downtown Center.

Sunday, there will be an Ugly Sweater 5K on campus to support a summer Promise Zone program. One summer program costs about $2,000, Kida said.

There have even been bottle and can drives to fund Promise Zone projects.

The Promise Zone is based on the community schools model designed to bring services to the schools, using schools as a hub.

“We are doing the work in the community, but we are also increasing development of academic courses and service learning programs so that our students learn about being good community members,” Bronstein said.

“Promise Zones are perfect for Binghamton University students to become integrated into the community,” said Pam Misener, Community Schools coordinator at BU.

“Graduate interns, largely from the school of social work, are offered profoundly important field opportunities,” she said. “Then there’s this whole new layer for an opportunity for undergraduate students. One of the things I think is so exciting is ... the number of undergraduate students who have expressed an interest in this from across the disciplines and across the schools in the university. They are really getting a chance to roll up their sleeves and build it.”

Carboine, the intern working at Snapp middle school, said she agreed.

“I’ve gained so much experience in the past few months that I wouldn’t have been able to get in any other type of internship,” she said.

Follow Christopher Feaver on Twitter @ckfeaver.
New Farm to School Fund Will Bring Local Produce to Rondout Valley School Lunchrooms

ACCORD – Rondout Valley Central School District (RVCSD)
Food Service Director Christopher Van Damm says that when it comes to the fruits and vegetables served in the District’s cafeterias, fresher is always better.

To help Van Damm fill kids’ lunch trays with more of that fresh, healthy local produce, and benefit regional farmers at the same time, the District has launched a Farm to School Fund. The fund, supported by donations from the community, will be used to purchase food from Rondout Valley farmers for use in District cafeterias.

The idea for the fund came from Board of Education President Breanna Costello, the mother of three Rondout Valley students and a longtime supporter of the District’s school gardens. Costello, like many parents and school officials, wanted to see children enjoying local food in the lunchroom, but realized that obtaining it can sometimes be cost-prohibitive. School districts are required by law to competitively bid for the food they purchase, which can make buying from small local farms a challenge.

“We believe that with the school district, local distributors and farmers working together can overcome some of these challenges and bring local food into the school cafeteria,” said Deborah DeWan, Executive Director of the Rondout Valley Growers Association (RVGA), non-profit comprised of local farmers, residents and businesses.

Costello said that because of the mandated purchasing constraints put on districts, “finances have been our biggest roadblock” in terms of serving food grown in the Rondout Valley. So she spent some time “dreaming up different ways to unlock some doors,” and the Farm to School Fund was born. Since the food would be donated through the fund, the purchasing barriers are removed.

“It’s an awesome idea,” said Rondout Valley Superintendent Rosario Agostaro. “I think it’s a win-win for both the District and Rondout Valley growers.”

Van Damm, whose department serves approximately 1,000 lunches per day, said the fund would be a viable way for him to obtain fresh, locally grown items that the District uses in large quantity, like broccoli.
“I think it’s great. I’m open to buying local,” Van Damm said. “If we could buy local broccoli with the fund, I would use that in a heartbeat.”

Produce of various kinds is a popular menu item in the District, particularly since a salad bar opened at the High School last year. Carrots, tomatoes, red peppers, cucumbers, salad greens, and legumes are available every day, both à la carte and as one component of a complete lunch. Many of the items served on the salad bar, along with fruit, are available from farmers in the Rondout Valley, which has the highest concentration of active farmland in Ulster County.

DeWan said the Farm to School Fund would not only bring more regionally grown food into District lunchrooms, but would also connect students to where their food is grown.

“There’s both a nutritional element and an educational element to it,” DeWan said. “It has the potential to be very powerful.”

The fund is the latest collaboration in a strong ongoing relationship between the District and the RVGA. Farmers who are part of the RVGA are regular visitors in District classrooms and have assisted with greenhouses and other projects.

“We’re ready and the farmers are ready to make a start, to build on our relationship, and move forward with the community’s support,” DeWan said.

The Farm to School Fund is managed by the Rondout Valley Education Foundation, which administers more than a dozen similar funds for a variety of District programs. All money donated to the Farm to School Fund will be used specifically for the purchase of locally grown food.
MEMO IN OPPOSITION

A.2551 (Cusick) S.1976 (Golden)

Part E of A.3006/S.2006 (Executive Budget)

We strongly oppose A.2551/S.1976 and Part E of A.3006/S.2006, which would enact the Education Investment Incentives Tax Credit.

These bills divert hundreds of millions of dollars away from public schools and services. In the first three years alone, $675 million ($300 million under Part E of A.3006/S.2006) would be siphoned from the General Fund — monies that should be supporting public schools and other public services.

Worse yet, this legislation does nothing to help low wealth, high-need students, or middle or low-income donors. Rather, it would allow the wealthy to avoid their tax liability while withholding the taxes they owe to support the public good.

We cannot continue to divert resources from our schools, communities and public services, while we ask our schools and students to raise standards and reach higher expectations.

New York’s public school children are still owed $4 billion under the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit and $1 billion under the Gap Elimination Adjustment. How can hundreds of millions of dollars in tax giveaways to the wealthy be justified when our public schools and students are still struggling and the state is not funding the sound basic education that its own constitution requires?
Groton Central School District is a rural upstate district of 900 students that seeks a Superintendent with a proven record of academics, leadership, and fiscal management. NYS SDA or SDL certification. Application materials located at tstboces.org in Vacancy – Leadership Positions.

Salary: $125,000 - $140,000
Deadline to Apply: March 6, 2015
Send letter of interest, application, and certification to:
   Jeffrey A. Matteson, Ph.D.
   Tompkins-Seneca-Tioga BOCES
   555 Warren Road
   Ithaca, NY 14850
   Telephone: 607-257-1551

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