AND….WE’RE OFF!

Off and running in the 2017-2018 school year. Like Spring Training and NFL Preseason, at this time of year we’re full of hope that everyone will be a winner. In our case that means that all students will reach their learning potential this year. But what are their odds?

Looking at the half full glass, we’d say that finances for most of our districts were maintained at the status quo. No real cuts, but no real bonus funds with which to start needed new programs and services. It’s been that way for a couple of years now and we’re recovering from the recession-era cuts. Federal funds have also been largely stable and almost all local budgets passed last spring. Simply put, as we begin the year, we’re not in financial crisis mode.

Better yet, with a state legislative election year ahead, we can at least expect a “regular” aid increase. Recent talks with the governor’s education staff and legislative leaders points to a newfound recognition of the needs of rural schools. I would expect that the majority of “new money” for schools will be directed to those most in need. That’s good for rural districts (that currently receive about half the state average of funding per student.) The latest news on the Congressional version of the federal budget looks like most programs will stay at current levels or experience modest increases-no cuts to educational programs (as was suggested by the administration.) Heading into the new year with a rational expectation of federal, state and local support is reassuring (reassurance that we don’t always enjoy!)

Add to that the fact that the federal and state approaches to ESSA appear to be reasonable, taking into account the ability of small, rural schools to comply with requirements. The new state learning standards are a step forward, recognizing the cognitive abilities of special needs students, ELLs and early learners. The focus is off of testing and on a broader array of measures that give a more well-rounded indicator of the needs of the “whole child”. Add in a new state focus on equity and you have a pretty encouraging atmosphere!

Sure, there will be challenges…and significant ones at that. Increased student poverty levels are affecting almost every district (many that were never formerly challenged in this way.) Overcoming the impact of student poverty on learning takes additional resources and while
we’re holding steady, neither the state nor feds have been willing to financially address increased ELL numbers or provide the funds needed to overcome learning deficits attended to poverty.

The opioid epidemic and student transience will remain front and center; too immediate to ignore and periodically throwing tragedy in the face of our school communities. Decreasing enrollment and declining economic activity in our rural schools and communities will continue to press us hard, as will the burgeoning teacher shortage. The recent NYS ASBO study on rural education indicated that over half of our rural parents are telling their kids to leave home to find a better life after school. That’s truly discouraging-and telling. How will we address these very real and very distressing challenges? Well, I know that each district will fight the good fight in its own individual way, using local strengths and resources. But I do have a philosophy that I think can help. It’s simplistic and yet much more demanding than you’d think: Just love ‘em.

That’s right, just love your students. It’s the advice my father gave my brother as he entered teaching and the advice he gave me when I became a father. We laid Dad to rest this past weekend. He was a pioneer in Special Education (one of the first to receive a doctorate in the field) and in 1978 had been named International Special Educator of the Year. He knew his stuff. While “just love ‘em” may sound trite, for schools it’s an intense and holistic approach to our responsibility to educate and protect those in our charge. Just love ‘em means that you build relationships with your students (something rural schools are known for) and their families. It means that you know them and their circumstances well enough to recognize their individual needs.

Maybe you’re tempted to identify a student as having “special needs” when their actual special need is a quiet and safe place to do their homework rather than the raucous home life they know. Loving them means caring enough to know what’s going on. It might mean recognizing they can’t see the board or hear the teacher, or have a toothache that’s distracting them. Loving them means knowing whether they ate regularly last weekend. And loving them means finding out those things in a way that doesn’t shame them. Not easy, is it?

My younger brother is Utah’s Teacher of the Year and deservedly so (the brat!) One of the ways he carries out Dad’s advice is by arranging for (and then often bringing) dinner to each of his students’ families each fall. He wants to see where they live, what the family dynamics are, learn whether they have internet, a quiet place to study, a brother that bullies, etc. Do they spend some nights with dad and some with mom? Will they temporarily move between grandma’s house and mom’s and dad’s during the course of the year? Not everyone can or should have dinner with all of their students’ families, but we all need to find ways to connect with our students, so that we really understand their challenges; because in learning, their learning challenges are our teaching challenges.

I had the privilege of speaking on opening day at Mount Markham. Like most of our rural districts, Mt. Markham has seen its enrollment drop over several years, but they’ve been able to restore their agricultural program and FFA has returned. They have a wonderful campus and dedicated staff; a great example of a rural district. I’ll tell you what I told them: You will overcome your challenges because of who you are. This is what you’ve chosen to do with the time you’ve been given on this earth. It matters. You won’t get rich, but you’ll meet grown up former students who are successful and happy, because you have helped prepare them to be successful and happy. You won’t have monuments built to your contributions, but the children you help “build” will collectively contribute more than you could possibly imagine.

And so on this occasion of beginning our annual journey once again, I will say to all of you what I said to the folks at Mr. Markham and what I say to every veteran I meet: Thanks for being there for us. Public education may not be the most financially rewarding profession out there, but it surely is the most important. So on behalf of your Rural Schools Association, know that while you’re working your magic, we’ll be fighting to give you the most up to date and important information, as well as advocating for the resources and policies that will support you in that noble effort. Have a great year!

David A. Little
Executive Director
U.S. Department of Education

REAP FUNDING TO BE MADE SIMPLER AND RETROACTIVE

The Senate Appropriations Committee just passed a 2018 funding bill that includes the following language:

"The Committee recognizes that the Department's new application requirement for local education agencies (SCHOOL DISTRICTS) to access Rural Education Achievement Program [REAP] funding in fiscal year 2017 prevented some eligible LEAs from accessing grant funding under this program. The Committee directs the Department to simplify the REAP application process, eliminate unnecessary administrative burdens, and directly engage with eligible LEAs and other relevant stakeholders to ensure that the Department's requirements accommodate the unique needs of these small, rural, and remote schools. Additionally, the Committee encourages the Department to use any unobligated available funding to make awards to LEAs who received a grant in fiscal year 2016, but failed to initially submit an application for fiscal year 2017 due to demonstrable administrative burden, provided they submit an application for funding."

Your RSA pushed to get this language included, and we’re hopeful that this will push the Department to make things right with REAP. If any schools who missed out on funding this year want help working with the Department to try to access their REAP funds, just let us know and we'd be happy to help put you in touch with the right Congressional staff that can get things moving.

Announcements

1. RSA Fall Survey: Please take a few moments to send us your ideas about several topics we will be working on in the upcoming year, and ideas about other topics you would like to see us work on. The survey is open from Wednesday, September 13, through Friday, September 22, 2017. Last year about 33% of our members responded, setting the agenda for the entire membership – MAKE SURE YOUR VOICE IS HEARD! It will take you about 15 min to complete the survey. All responses are anonymous. You can find it here: https://cornell.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9twgsDuG0WHMwpn

If you have any questions or concerns about the survey, please contact Gretchen at gkr1@cornell.edu or 607-254-3557.
Fact is folks, our reality these days is challenging. Our rural communities are hurting. We’ve lost jobs that aren’t likely to return. We’ve lost college graduates because they don’t have those jobs to come home to. From a recent NYS Association of School Business Officials research paper, we learned that over half of our rural parents are recommending that their children leave home for a better life. We have significantly fewer students and it’s become harder to find qualified teachers. The opioid epidemic has wreaked havoc on the stability of households and our schools are left struggling to adjust to the migration of increasingly transitional and temporary students.

Thankfully, there’s good news as well, including a new state response to ESSA that appears at first blush to be rational, a new SED focus on addressing equity among schools and the fact that we’re heading into an election year for state legislators (which typically means healthier school aid levels.)

Even more encouraging is what appears for all the world to be near universal recognition among the public educational community that we need to address the issues facing our rural schools. In meetings with the Regents State Aid Committee and the governor’s education staff, the large statewide educational advocacy organizations were in agreement with RSA’s call for attention to the challenges of rural schools. Our message seems to have resonated with state leaders. Now, (assuming they provide resources) we are faced with the best way to tackle our problems.

Some time back, RSA realized that the Community Schools Model is a promising approach to the rural school dilemma. Community Schools seek to partner with community and regional agencies and private organizations to bring additional programming and services into our schools; most often for students, but sometimes including services for the entire community. RSA sits on the Steering Committee for the New York Community Schools Network, which has successfully advocated for Community Schools funding for our schools. The State Education Department is currently working on providing technical assistance to districts in how to use these funds.

Community Schools began as an urban response to the need for pre-school, after school and weekend programming for kids, as well as dental, vision, mental health and other health care. Here’s the general idea: The school provides space and a services coordinator. Community providers take up residence in the school facility providing a wide range of services. It works well in urban settings because there are usually a number of private providers. The Community School idea becomes more challenging in rural communities because there are fewer private providers. Often, school-community-partnerships are limited to BOCES, community colleges and county social service agencies. But, Community Schools can work in a rural setting. Here’s why:

1. The combination of newly constructed or renovated school facilities and decreasing enrollment in rural communities has left schools with usable space.
2. The wide array of student and community need in response to increased poverty and decreased economic activity makes for high demand.
3. The state recognizes the situation and is seeking ways to address it, including significant funding for Community Schools (which the Community Schools Network is seeking to increase.)
4. The Community Schools model has the ability to provide desperately needed programs and services in a convenient location. For instance, students don’t have to miss a day of classes to travel for vision or dental care.
services. After school and weekend programs help students be truly competitive in spots in higher education and post-secondary employment. Community members that are used to the school being the hub of the community can gain easy access to much needed mental health, family counseling or healthcare services.

Below you’ll find the mission statement of the Community Schools Network. Please join your RSA in advocating for this potentially dramatic effort to restore our schools and rural communities to prominence!

**New York State Community Schools Network**

**MISSION STATEMENT**
The New York State Community Schools Network advocates to develop, promote, and sustain community schools in partnership with government, local school districts, and community partners. Through a diverse coalition of community-based agencies, parents, teachers, and statewide advocates, we champion effective community school policies so that children and families can thrive.

**(GOVERNANCE & SUSTAINABILITY WORKGROUP CLARIFY AND ORGANIZE AREAS INTO WORKPLAN)**

**WHO WE ARE**
The New York State Community Schools Network is a diverse coalition to support and advance the development of local and statewide community school initiatives.

**WHAT WE DO**
1. Policy & Advocacy
2. Learning Community
   - State and Local Engagement

**HOW WE DO IT**
- Highlight and share information about impactful community school policies and practices
- Share information about the range of technical assistance available to local community school efforts
- Build broader understanding and support for community schools among local and state-level policymakers, district personnel, and school and community leaders
- Include whole child education and developmental domains of human growth; physical/social/emotional/ethical and cognitive
- Include facilitation of school-university assisted partnerships including pre-service teacher education and the preparation of health and social service professionals
- Develop and promote a state level policy framework (administrative and legislative) that supports local community schools work, including a focus on the range of contributing funding streams, policies, and practices including a focus on state public education formula to include community schools as part of public education costs
- Facilitating technical assistance, standards, and research to advocate for the community school strategy
- Develop and promote greater interagency collaborators that support local community schools work
- Compel higher education to include training of in-service and pre-service educators (leaders, teachers, counselors, etc. around the community schools model work, strategy, and practice).
- Build a broad coalition of support for community schools to ensure sustainable funding through the state public education formula and resources to support the growth and impact of community schools across New York State.
Dear RSA Members,

The Community & Regional Development Institute (CaRDI) is hosting its annual Community Development Institute on Thursday/Friday September 28 and 29, 2017. The theme of this year’s event is **Building Sustainable Communities: Global Forces, Local Focus**. I have attached a flyer, and a brief article appeared in the Cornell Chronicle recently: [http://news.cornell.edu/stories/2017/08/building-sustainable-communities-forum-sept-28-29](http://news.cornell.edu/stories/2017/08/building-sustainable-communities-forum-sept-28-29)

CaRDI seeks to integrate the important and often difficult work that you do in your schools and communities with the latest research and policy perspectives. The September CDI event will be successful only if we have a strong showing of practitioners and community stakeholders to engage in these issue-based discussions. Some of your colleagues (John Sipple – Cornell; Larry Spring – Schenectady City Schools Superintendent) will be formal panel presenters, but we really need you to attend and be active participants! **The session on “Inequality” will focus on income and educational inequality in NYS, but we hope that you will find the other sessions of interest as well.** The draft agenda can be viewed via our website at [https://cardi.cals.cornell.edu/training/cdi/2017-institute](https://cardi.cals.cornell.edu/training/cdi/2017-institute)

To assist you in attending this event, we would like to offer a reduced registration rate of $60 for the two day event. This covers meals from Thursday morning through Friday lunch - including a dinner at the Cornell Robert Trent Jones Golf Course - Moakley House.

Registration must be completed by next Friday, September 22nd. If you are interested, you will need to contact us directly and then we will send you the link to access the special reduced rate.

We hope you will take us up on our offer and join us in late September!

Please contact my colleague Robin Blakely-Armitage (rmb18@cornell.edu) directly with any questions you might have, and if you would like to register for this event through this special RSA offer!

We look forward to seeing many of you in a few weeks!

Gretchen
Low-Income School Districts Seeing Universal Free Meals Paying Dividends In Students’ Achievement

By Amanda Spadaro

Students in the Middletown School District won’t need to worry about forgetting their lunch money in the upcoming school year, or even having lunch money at all. They’re joining thousands of other students in the region who know that there is such a thing as free lunch, and free breakfast, at districts that provide meals for every student regardless of family income.

The free breakfasts and lunches are provided through the Community Eligibility Provision, a need-based federal program administered by the state Department of Education. In the 2016-2017 school year, 131 districts in New York participated in the program, reaching more than 317,000 students.

To qualify for the program, a district must show that at least 40 percent of its students are Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program recipients, Medicaid recipients, homeless, foster children or migrant youth. Under U.S. Code Title 20, a migrant youth is a child whose parent or guardian is a migratory farm worker, dairy worker or fisher who moved between districts in the past 36 months to find work.

In Middletown, more than 75 percent of students qualified for free or reduced lunch in the 2016-2017 school year, according to Debra Donleavy, the director of food and nutrition services. The district served almost 809,000 lunches in 2016-17, but in the coming school year, the number is expected to jump to more than 1 million, Donleavy said. The district also anticipates growth in its breakfast program.

Donleavy hopes the free meals will have a domino effect, increasing student health and achievement. Paying attention in class isn’t the first priority for students who are hungry.

“We are expecting to have higher attendance,” she said. “We’re anticipating an overall more cohesive, happy place to learn because the common stress of ‘Where is my next meal coming from?’ will be avoided.”

In previous years, the district ran an online sale system with students using ID codes to pay, meaning there was rarely cash exchanged in the lunch room. This prevented other students from noticing which children paid less or not at all, according to Donleavy.

If a student’s account balance ran low, cafeteria employees contacted parents to discuss unpaid charges.

Newburgh realizes benefits

The benefits of the program have already been realized in the Newburgh School District, where breakfast and lunch were universally free beginning in the 2016-17 school year, according to Caitlin Lazarski, the district’s food services director. The district served 1.2 million breakfasts and 1.3 million lunches last year and received $6.7 million in federal and state reimbursement.

The district saw improvements in attendance and a reduction in tardiness, nurse visits and behavioral issues, Lazarski said. Mirroring Middletown’s approach, the district always provided a meal to students regardless of ability to pay, Lazarski said.

“We were not a district that was shaming,” she said. “We were continuing to give the students the meal. We don’t want to waste food, and we’re not going to humiliate a child.”

The program has also benefited children whose families didn’t quite qualify for free or reduced-price meals and has saved families money, Lazarski said.

“When people are struggling or are food-insecure, that little bit of money really does help out in the long run,” she said. The Fallsburg School District will start its fourth year of providing free breakfasts and lunches this fall, according to Superintendent Ivan Katz. In 2016-2017, the district provided almost 104,000 breakfasts and more than 176,00 lunches, receiving $930,270 in reimbursements.

The program has eliminated any potential stigma from peers knowing which students qualify for free and reduced lunch, Katz said. “It’s allowed all students to be the same, which I think is very powerful,” he said.

Brain Drain in Rural Upstate NY: Schools Report Enrollment Declines, More Poverty

Rural schools in Upstate New York are struggling with rapid declines in enrollment and increasing poverty, according to a report released today.

While thousands of students have left rural public districts, poverty rates in these schools have increased, according to the analysis by the New York State Association of School Business Officials.

In the report, the association examined 340 rural districts, which make up about half the districts in the entire state, but enroll just 11.1 percent of the state's students.

Some districts didn't have a single senior in the graduating class.

It found that between the 2004-05 and 2014-15 school years, 97 percent of rural districts experienced enrollment declines. About 85 percent had enrollment declines of 10 percent or more.

The data shows that the most rural regions in the state have experienced the worst population drain. The Finger Lakes and Southern Tier each lost about 15 percent of their student populations. Central New York, Western New York and Mohawk Valley had between 12 and 15 percent declines.

Nearly half of rural districts are now considered "high need," due to decreasing family incomes and rural poverty.

Rural schools still have lower poverty rates than non-rural schools, but the gap is narrowing: In 2003, the poverty rate among school-aged children in rural schools was around 14 percent, with the rate in non-rural schools closer to 20 percent.

The most recent poverty rate for non-rural schools is about 21 percent, while the rate in rural schools increased to around 23 percent.

The student population in all New York schools is going down -- it corresponds with overall population declines in New York state. Rural areas have been hit the hardest.

According to the report, the population is also aging -- the percentage of New Yorkers older than 55 increased by about 7 percent in the last 16 years, while the percentage younger than 40 fell 5 percent.

These demographic changes have presented a number of challenges, according to the report:

- Staffing -- Fluctuations in classes year to year makes administrators hesitant to hire new staff.
- Funding -- Declining enrollment means less state aid and that strains school budgets.
- Quality of education -- Students in rural schools might not have the same opportunities to take Advanced Placement or college preparation courses, or participate in sports, music or other extra-curricular activities.
- Social interaction -- Declining enrollment leads to social isolation.

The association is encouraging districts to collaborate with each other to share things such as college-level courses or sports teams. It's also pushing for more state funding to help districts provide pre-kindergarten classes and internet access.

Reporter Julie McMahon covers education. She can be reached anytime: jmcmahon@syracuse.com, 315-412-1992. Reprinted from syracuse.com
NYSASBO Releases Report on
Demographic Challenges Facing Rural Schools

The New York State Association of School Business Officials (NYSASBO) has released a brief report entitled Demographic Challenges Facing Rural Schools: Declining Populations and Growing Poverty. The report analyzes demographic trends in New York State to highlight the challenges facing rural school districts and their communities.

Sustained enrollment declines and increasing student poverty have placed enormous strain on rural schools.

Over the past ten years, 84.9 percent of rural schools have suffered enrollment decreases of at least 10 percent, while the poverty rate for rural school students grew from 13.7 percent to 17.7 percent. Other demographic changes, such as an increasing share of state population over 55 (increasing from 24.4% in 2000 to 33.4% in 2016), is another challenge for rural communities.

“The challenges facing rural school districts and their communities requires a comprehensive approach from state policymakers that recognizes their unique needs and limitations,” stated Michael J. Borges, NYSASBO Executive Director.

“The state needs to provide targeted incentives and remove road blocks to collaborative efforts that seek to create a more efficient and effective educational framework for rural school students,” concluded Mr. Borges.

ASBO supports regional high schools, the utilization of BOCES and other shared service models, distance/online learning among other proposals to assist rural schools in providing a quality education to their students in a cost effective manner.

To download the press release click here.

To view the report click here.
Schools Throughout the Country are Grappling With Teacher Shortage, Data Show
By Caitlin Ostroff, CNN

Lynn Sorrells started teaching 26 years ago because she loved seeing the light-bulb moment when a kid grasped a new concept.

She still does. But as principal of a high school in Dorchester County, Maryland, she is struggling to find an algebra and geometry teacher just weeks before her school year is set to begin.

As students head back to school, Sorrells' district is one of hundreds across the country grappling with a growing teacher shortage -- especially in key areas such as math and special ed.

"Currently, there are not enough qualified teachers applying for teaching jobs to meet the demand in all locations and fields," said the Learning Policy Institute, a national education think tank, in a research brief in September.

Some schools, such as in New York City, are being forced to increase class sizes, which some studies show can reduce how much a student learns.

The institute estimated last year that if trends continue, there could be a nationwide shortfall of 112,000 teachers by 2018.

What subjects are most affected?
Public schools in 48 states and the District of Columbia report teacher shortages in math for the 2017-18 school year, according to the US Department of Education. Forty-six states report shortages in special education, 43 in science and 41 in foreign languages.

Statistics on shortages may be based on the percentage of unfilled teaching jobs, the number of emergency credentials given to those without traditional teaching certificates and the number of teachers hired after the school year starts, says Dan Goldhaber, director of the University of Washington's Center for Education Data and Research.

It's always been harder to fill teacher jobs in math, science and special education positions, Sorrells said. But the past five years have been worse than usual.

Increasingly, she said, teachers in areas like math and science are leaving for higher-paying private sector jobs after a few years.

As a result, many teachers who remain are being asked to do more. Some states, like Califórnia, are seeing classes with up to 35 students, says Linda Darling-Hammond, director of the Learning Policy Institute.

And some schools are making do without certain subjects.

Is there help on the way?
Probably not soon. The supply of aspiring teachers has been dwindling.

Nationwide, teacher education enrollments dropped 35% between 2009 and 2014, the most recent year for which data are available, according to the Learning Policy Institute.

A survey at UCLA found that freshmen's interest in teaching as a career has steadily declined over the past decade.
And in Colorado, for example, the number of people becoming teachers and administrators fell more than 24% from the start of the 2010-11 school year to the end of the 2015-16 school year, according to the Department of Higher Education.

**So what's causing this?**
Goldhaber, who studies educational trends at the University of Washington, sees two main reasons.

**Math and science teachers aren't paid enough.** Salaries for US secondary school teachers have largely remained the same over the past two decades, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. And students in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math) can make more in other professions than they would teaching.

**Teaching in the US is too demanding.** About 8% of teachers leave teaching each year, with two-thirds quitting before retirement, according to the Learning Policy Institute. This is double the percentage of teachers leaving the profession in countries like Singapore and Finland.

This turnover is especially high in subjects such as special education, which can place additional demands on teachers.

"I'm having more of those conversations where teachers are questioning, 'Do I want to put 30 years in public education?" said Sorrells, the Maryland high school principal.

"The reality of contemporary public education ... (is) that it's amazing; it's fulfilling; it's a calling." But it can also be exhausting, she says.

**How do we fix it?**
Goldhaber cites some solutions:

* **Help students be more strategic about their teaching opportunities.** When students enter teaching certification programs, let them know where the jobs are. In many parts of the country, they'll have an easier time finding jobs to teach math or science than English.

* **Partner school districts with local college and university programs.** Though the teacher shortage is rooted partly in subject areas, it's also a matter of location. Schools in low-income areas struggle more to fill positions. "It is the kids that are oftentimes most at risk that are the ones who are likely to suffer the most," Goldhaber said.

One way to fix that would be to pull in students from local higher-ed programs to help teach in those areas. Many may stick around for a full-time job after graduation.

Sorrells says she also reaches out to private-sector employers to find people with expertise in certain fields who may be interested in teaching.

* **Make teacher certification national instead of state by state.** Prospective teachers must pass an exam specific to the state they want to work in. But if a teacher wants to move from, say, Pennsylvania to California, they can't immediately apply for jobs there. By having a national certification exam, teachers would have more mobility to go where they're needed.

At the end of the day, Sorrells believes schools are there to give students the most rigorous education they can. Without quality teachers, she says, they can't do that.

"I think at the most fundamental level, that's most important," she said. "I've got to be able to look my parents in the eye and say 'the teachers standing in front of your child are the most competent, capable teachers anywhere.'"