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RSA NEWS

September 2015 Issue



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2015: SHADOWS OF SUCCESS, DAWN OF THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR

Friends, welcome to the new school year! This year is an important step in a series for most of our students and the rebirth of our life's work for many adults. But for our youngest students, this is the dawn of an entirely new adventure in their lives. For some parents, this is when

they first relinquish their most cherished possession to the care of others. As the educational community, we take that responsibility with the utmost focus and preparation. As your Rural Schools Association, the beginning of the new school year means that we will provide you with the information, advocacy and tools you need to maximize the education you provide to your students. We take on that responsibility with the same level of focus and care.

In this edition of your RSA newsletter, we review the highlights of the summer conference, take a look at what we accomplished in this past legislative session and assess where we are in reaching the goals your Board of Directors established for this year. One of those goals was the production of a video explaining the mission and services of your Rural Schools Association. We hope that this two minute video will help spread the word about the programs and services offered by your association.



Danlittlephoto.com



*RSA Executive Director
David Little introduces
the new RSA video.*

*Click anywhere on the picture to
hear the message from your RSA*

RSA 2015 Conference Highlights

The 2015 Rural Schools Association Summer Conference brought together local educators, regional and state education officials, along with leading experts in efficiency and educational effectiveness. Record numbers of rural school leaders convened in Cooperstown to hear the latest and the most innovative information affecting rural schools and the communities that support them.

Rallying around the theme of **Communities Committed to Educational Excellence**, attendees participated in seminars addressing the entire gamut of rural school challenges. They learned how to connect communities to their schools and how to maximize technology in a rural setting. They heard how to prepare students for their own personal future, how the flipped classroom provides an innovative path to success and how to coordinate local farms with school food service programs.

Attendees also learned how to reduce summer learning loss, how to tuition students to preserve educational opportunities and how to prepare our youngest rural students for the start of their formal education. Hearing from local experts relaying proven methods of success, conference participants also had the chance to speak with private providers of programs and services. Always a popular and informative session, Cornell Professor and RSA Board member John Sipple provided information on how districts can utilize data not only to compare but to project school district performance.

For many, the highlight of the conference was the chance to hear from state leaders, Rural School Association honorees and the Future Farmers of



Regent James Dawson Accepting His Award

Click this [link](#) to read the full text of Dr. Dawson's remarks regarding his award.

Finally, we honored one of our own, RSA Board Member Don Vredenburg for his years of devotion to RSA, his local schools and all RSA member districts.

Your association was also honored to be selected by State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia as her first public speaking engagement after taking over the post. Commissioner Elia pledged to partner with RSA and its member school districts in advancing the interests of rural students. The commissioner told attendees that she would be collaborative and yet strident in her approach to the state's many educational issues, such as APPR, Common Core implementation and testing's opt-out movement.



Newly appointed North Country Regent Beverly Ouderirk addresses conference attendees.

America Oratorical Competition winner, Margaret Brownell of Greenwich Central. Your Rural Schools Association took the opportunity to honor longtime "Rural Regent" James Dawson with the creation of a lifetime service award in his name.



FFA Oratorical Winner Margaret Brownell

RSA also honored SED Assistant Commissioner Charles "Chuck" Szuberla for his outstanding and dedicated career of service to public education and Senator Cathy Young for her effective legislative advocacy on behalf of rural children and the schools that serve them.



State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia

You'd think that with all that under their belts, attendees would be winding down by the final day of the conference, but far from it: Tuesday morning was highlighted by a panel of state education experts, moderated by public broadcasting's Albany Bureau Chief Karen DeWitt and featuring NYSCOSS Deputy Executive Director Bob Lowry, NYSSBA Executive Director Tim Kremer and the "Albany Insiders" from Capital Tonight, Bob Bellafore and Steve Greenberg. The most innovative methods, the latest information and the most respected experts all converging with RSA members in one place made the 2015 RSA Summer Conference memorable and productive event.



Albany Bureau Chief Karen DeWitt, NYSCOSS Deputy Executive Director Bob Lowry, NYSSBA Executive Director Tim Kremer and the "Albany Insiders" from Capital Tonight, Bob Bellafore and Steve Greenberg.



Conference attendees listen to the Tuesday Morning Panel.

A profound **"Thank You"** to exhibitors and special friends who have provided support for the 2015 RSA Conference. They include:

- ALBANY MEPS
- BEARSCH COMPEAU KNUDSON
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- JOHN DEERE
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- TURNER CONSTRUCTION COMPANY
- UTICA NATIONAL INSURANCE GROUP
- WELLIVER

The Rural Schools Association 2016 Conference will be held July 10-12, 2016 at the Otesaga Resort Hotel in Cooperstown, NY. Look for details on our website RSANYS.org in late April or early May 2016. See you there in 2016!

**SENATOR YOUNG HONORED WITH
“RURAL SCHOOLS APPRECIATION AWARD”
FROM
THE RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK STATE**



Senator Catharine Young accepts the “Rural Schools Appreciation Award” from David Little, Executive Director for the Rural Schools Association of New York, and Gordon Daniels, Superintendent of the Franklin Central School District and Chair of the Board of Directors for the Rural Schools Association.

COOPERSTOWN – Long a champion for our local school districts, students, teachers, and parents, Senator Catharine Young (R,C,I - Olean) recently received statewide recognition with the “Rural Schools Appreciation Award” for her work advocating for rural school districts across the state.

The award was presented to Senator Young by the Rural Schools Association of New York at their annual conference, in recognition of her work as Chair of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, her efforts on behalf of children and families, and her legislative initiatives to bolster education in rural communities.

“Senator Young is a stalwart supporter of rural schools and the communities that support them. She is a tireless advocate in the halls of government and is remarkably dedicated in her efforts to communicate with local officials. She always makes sure she understands both the policy and the politics and serves as an effective communicator between her constituents and her colleagues. The Rural Schools Association is honored to recognize her years of wonderful representation of the interests of rural New York State,” said David Little, Executive Director for the Rural Schools Association of New York.

“I am very grateful and deeply honored to receive the ‘Rural Schools Appreciation Award’ from the Rural Schools Association,” said Senator Young. “It is a joy and a pleasure to be able to speak up for our children and to ensure they receive the best education possible. Sound investment in all levels of education, including primary and higher education, is the best way we can combat rural poverty and give our children the opportunities they need to succeed.”

During the 2015 Legislative Session, Senator Young helped secure a record \$582 million in state funding for schools in her district. Her efforts also helped restore more than \$11.5 million in GEA cuts that adversely affected rural, upstate schools, leading to the GEA being nearly eliminated from her schools, with it 94.6 percent gone.

Senator Young also championed sound educational policy for upstate rural schools. Earlier this year, she wrote a letter to the Commissioner of Education requesting that the State Education Department (SED) provide greater flexibility in response to the governor’s proposal to use outside independent evaluators. Senator Young argued that the policy failed to take into account the long distance and the limited number of administrators used by smaller rural schools, and that the policy would result in a significant cost burden for local taxpayers.

Last year, Senator Young sponsored legislation, that became law, to bring greater academic enrichment and opportunities to classrooms across the state through the creation of a statewide online and blended learning program. Virtual learning programs, including online courses and blended learning initiatives, combine both a physical location with online resources to provide schools with cost-effective opportunities for students to access coursework and educational resources otherwise not available.



NAME THE NEWSLETTER!

The RSA newsletter has always been known as, well...the RSA newsletter. It needs a name. The "Rural School Reporter"? The "Times of Our Life"? You name it! Send your suggestion to dal295@cornell.edu. The winner will receive a free registration to any RSA event of their choosing.

2015 LEGISLATIVE PROGRESS REPORT

Last November, your RSA Board of Directors and Executive Director Dave Little met to establish the RSA Legislative Agenda. They focused on seven issues that were both important and were likely to be considered by state leaders. With the goal of providing rural school districts with an increased legislative presence and assuring that rural school needs became part of legislative deliberations, RSA made significant progress toward those goals. Here's a synopsis of that progress.

1. **Eliminate the GEA:** The top legislative goal of 2015 for RSA was the elimination of the GEA. Following extensive advocacy activities (including working with coalitions, meetings with legislators and governor's staff, issuing Calls to Action to members, press and community rallies, issuing legislative memos, testifying at hearings and appearing on radio and television) one half of the GEA was eliminated, leaving one half (less than \$500 million) for next year, along with a promise from legislators that it will in fact be gone in 2016.
2. **No Private School Tuition Tax Credits:** No organization was more visible on this issue than RSA. We led several press conferences at the Capitol, issued legislative memoranda, met with legislators and ultimately informed the final decision to reject tuition tax credits for private and parochial schools. The legislative and political alternative (of providing past due aid to private and parochial schools) was beneficial, rather than harmful to rural schools (as it established a precedent of the state actually repaying these past due sums to schools, all without siphoning off badly needed rural school resources.) This creates an opportunity to advocate for payment of past due amounts to all schools, as public schools are owed a couple of hundred million dollars in past due payments.
3. **No Charter School Cap Increase Outside of Urban Areas:** RSA also informed legislative action on this issue, as there was in fact no charter school cap increase outside of urban areas. RSA was extremely visible on this issue, calling for the state to avoid raising the overall cap and instead allow New York City and other urban areas to have the authority to apply for charter school slots already allocated for areas outside the City. This is an extremely beneficial approach as it not only retains the overall cap number (avoiding the prospect of more charter school applications in rural areas) but it actually decreases the likelihood of charters in suburban and rural areas, as New York City applies for charters previously reserved for areas outside the City boundaries. RSA took the lead, specifically suggesting this approach in its Legislative Agenda publication and in meetings and hearings on the state budget. Ultimately, the governor and legislative leaders listened and accepted RSA's approach.
4. **Increase Allowable Fund Balance:** Unfortunately, the legislature did not increase the authority of school districts to expand their undesignated fund balance in 2015. This is an extremely difficult issue, as allowing school districts to keep more money on hand is politically dangerous for state leaders. However, at this stage of fiscal recovery, few school districts are in the position to exceed the current limit. The prime rationale for expanding the fund balance was to offset increases in TRS and ERS expenses. As these are set to decline in 2016 (which is also an election year for legislators) there is little legislative interest in addressing this important issue.

5. **Make School District Employee Health Care Realistic:** RSA's primary goal in this issue area was to limit school district costs to 80% of the cost of employee health insurance. While the legislature chose to avoid acting directly on this issue, it did address the underlying financial implications (both by substantially increasing state aid to school districts and by passing legislation that exempts small school districts from the federal requirement that employers under 100 employees use a community rating pool for insurance.) With a looming change in federal law, this became a much more immediate issue for RSA. Our members were directly affected by this situation and faced significant increases in employee health insurance costs unless the state enacted an exemption. School employees typically have a rating pool that is much cheaper for insurers than the public's community rating. Forcing small schools into a community rating (rather than their own consortium of school employees) would have dramatically increased costs for our small, rural schools at a time when it would have been most damaging. RSA worked with BOCES advocates and others to educate leaders about the implications, ultimately resulting in a new law that allows our small rural schools to continue using their consortia for the next two years. An extender will likely ensue at the expiration of that law. This was a significant victory for our members and we are proud to have played a role in its passage.
6. **Bring the Cap on BOCES Teacher Reimbursement into the Modern Era:** The cap on BOCES teacher salaries is outdated, to say the least. Increasing the reimbursement would be a significant investment on the part of the state. RSA was successful in having each house of the legislature include an increase in BOCES teacher reimbursement in their respective versions of the state budget. Ultimately, rather than increasing the reimbursement rate, the state chose to once again pay full reimbursable aid to school districts for BOCES claims, as well as make significant progress on eliminating the GEA and providing additional operating (Foundation) aid. Yet, despite their inability to agree on an approach, RSA educated the legislature and the governor on the issue and prepared them for providing additional assistance through specific BOCES programs like STEM and CTE.
7. **No Program Cuts for Efficiency Checks:** The state's plan to first require districts to stay at the cap in order for local taxpayers to receive a small check was less helpful than actual state aid funding reform. Nonetheless, districts complied and local taxpayers (voters) got their checks. As RSA predicted, the second phase (where districts had to combine regionally to arrive at 1% reductions in spending in order to have the state pay their year to year increase under the cap) has been much less publicized. Schools were supposed to have heard whether their plans were accepted by the state Division of the Budget by July 15, but no information has been forthcoming. The money to pay for this program is in the state budget. No news is good news and the governor has every reason to want districts to claim as much efficiency as possible. Assuming all plans will be approved, schools will benefit from having the state pay for their year to year cost increases this year. This obviously supports the passage of local school budgets. New York State schools already share services at a greater rate than any other municipal entity or nation. There is a fine line between becoming more efficient and simply cutting programs and services. State leaders heard this loud and clear from RSA this year and as of this writing, all schools that submitted plans are poised to be approved. Once done, for 2016 RSA will advocate for the abolition of the program. If the state wants to continue to pay the price of local tax increases, wonderful. This would begin to rectify the fact that it currently only pays for 1/3 the cost of public education, leaving 2/3 to local taxpayers. However, the idea that schools have to keep cutting to qualify is improper.

SUMMARY: RSA was instrumental in our school districts achieving complete victories in three of the seven legislative priorities in 2015. Significant advances were made in three of the other four. For a not for profit entity (that is prohibited from endorsing candidates, issuing campaign contributions or any partisan activity) this is extremely rare. For an organization as small and previously removed from advocacy efforts, it is remarkable. RSA is proud to move into prominence in advocacy circles and to help our member districts in such critically important ways.

The following document was presented to member school districts following the 2014 Board of Director Retreat. It appears below, unaltered. It lays out goals for the association. The highlighted material following each section reports progress on each goal within the past year.

A VISION FOR YOUR RURAL SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

The RSA Board of Directors has set a new direction for your association. Here is the new vision for your Rural Schools Association:

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

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

PROGRESS: RSA has quickly become well known within state government as a visible and influential factor in public educational policymaking. As our legislative agenda report indicates, RSA made significant contributions to several key policy issues, resulting in substantial legislative enhancements, as well as the prevention of proposed adverse policies. RSA was able to inform both member districts and state leaders about the implications of all major policy considerations. Using professionally produced written materials that were distributed to all legislators, Regents and governor's staff, RSA made the interests of rural schools known throughout the legislative session. RSA also used radio, television and print media to relay its positions. RSA hosted and participated in numerous public rallies and advocacy events, produced electronic analysis for members and met with a great many member districts. RSA was visible at legislative committee and Board of Regents meetings, alerted members to contact legislators at appropriate times and personally testified at legislative hearings. RSA partnered with other educational and governmental groups to host press conferences on major issues affecting public education. In short, within the span of one legislative session, RSA and the interests of rural school districts have become well known and those interests are now being factored into public policy decisions. On the federal level, RSA has been in contact with key Congressional offices, as well as the Department of Education regarding such important issues as the reauthorization of ESEA, the E-Rate program and other federal education programs, like IDEA and Title 1.

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

PROGRESS: In the past year, RSA has moved from photocopied materials to professionally produced analysis. The association now combines perspective and insight with the professional appearance that allows for legislative and regulatory interest and respect. The material is being noticed and considered among the organizations whose positions must be reflected in policy decisions. RSA was covered on a statewide basis in radio, television and print media. The association presented its message from Longwood on Long Island to Jamestown in Western New York and was the featured presenter at a number of broad scale community events. RSA testified at legislative hearings and regularly issued legislative memoranda. RSA became known for hosting press conferences that received excellent media coverage. The result of this increased visibility was a corresponding increase in the consideration of RSA member interests. Where in the past, RSA was known as a small and helpful member organization, it is now recognized as able to marshal community support and bring rural school interests to the foreground of legislative and State Education Department activity. RSA has in fact, become highly visible and influential. Evidence of this new status can be found in this summer's conference, where State Education Commissioner Elia chose RSA's conference as her first public presentation and where the governor's top education policy staff agreed to meet with members.

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

PROGRESS: RSA now regularly provides members with straightforward, usable analysis of state issues. This past year we met individually with every member district that requested a presentation or visit from staff. We presented a great many regional events, meeting with groups of superintendents and/or board of education members. RSA began providing board/superintendent retreats as well as analytical seminars and advocacy presentations. RSA staff held events, met with districts and made presentations in every single area of New York State. These local events continue throughout the fall. Further (for the first time) RSA is presenting both a fall and winter seminar on rural school issues in conjunction with NYSCOSS conferences and both a breakfast summit and a rural school-specific session at the NYSBBA convention. When combined with the highly successful summer conference, RSA is succeeding in reaching out to rural school districts (both members and non members.) This has resulted in RSA having the highest membership number in its history. For those who still don't know about RSA, we produced the video found in this newsletter and on our website.

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

PROGRESS: RSA partnered with other organizations in advocacy, services and information. We established formal partnerships with three companies providing needed services to rural school districts, partnered with advocacy organizations in press and legislative events and partnered with other statewide and local educational organizations in the presentation of rural school interests. As a result, RSA has become known not only in legislative circles, but within the educational community as a valued member capable of helping those partners advance sound public educational policy and providing worthwhile programs and services to advance the effectiveness of schools.

***MAXIMIZE THE CORNELL CONNECTION:** The partnership between the Rural Schools Association and Cornell University is historically and programmatically important for our rural schools. The Rural Schools Program of RSA is part of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and is a member of the Community and Regional Development Institute (CaRDI). Each of these partnerships affords RSA the opportunity to serve students and its member districts through programs, services and research. Your association is increasing the use of paid and credit bearing programs for student interns to increase the level of information, research and services we provide to you. RSA serves as your full partner in the efforts of these groups to ensure that both they and our rural schools receive their full benefit. In addition, RSA hosts the Center for Rural Schools, a data driven member service. Rural school districts may use the center to compare their economic status, enrollment projections, academic performance and other factors against similarly situated schools, other schools within their region or all schools in the state.

PROGRESS: This past year, RSA participated in Cornell's Community and Regional Development Institute (CaRDI) work, was a featured presentation at a Cornell conference and worked collaboratively with Cornell to create a new RSA website. Cornell research continues to inform RSA advocacy positions and presentations to members. The Cornell connection has resulted in RSA staff being called on to work on some of public education's most pressing issues. Yet this is the area of RSA's vision that currently requires the most attention. In the upcoming year, RSA plans to increase cooperation with Cornell students to improve our database (and increase our ability to communicate with members.) We plan to include student work in statistical analysis on advocacy positions. If time permits, staff will increase participation in CaRDI work as well. The Cornell connection has created some logistical and financial challenges for RSA and in the coming year, the RSA board expects to perform a thorough analysis of the relationship, to maximize the benefits of RSA membership.

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

PROGRESS: Over the past year, RSA has participated in surveys, planning and discussions held with fellow rural education associations. We are in regular discussions with rural education organizations in the Northeast and have assisted several state associations with projects and information gathering. RSA has engaged in extensive communication with the National Rural Education Association (NREA) and with the American Association of School Administrators (who perform the advocacy work of the NREA in Congress.) Having established RSA's statewide presence this past year, the work of becoming known within national rural education is before us in the coming year.

NOTE: None of the work described above would have been possible without the collaboration and dedication of RSA's Natalie Mitchell, Tom Marzeski, Dr. John Sipple, other RSA staff and the RSA Board of Directors (who provide much needed advice, counsel and direction in our work.) Please accept my deep appreciation for your help in this, my first year as your executive director. Your knowledge, patience and assistance have made the work rewarding and effective on behalf of our membership. Thank you for helping to make 2015 a transformative year in the life of RSA and its member districts!

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

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

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

Rural Schools Association of New York

Second Annual Breakfast Forum for Board Trustees and Superintendents

Co-sponsored with R.E.F.I.T., Statewide School Finance Consortium, and Mid-Hudson School Study Council

An opportunity to hear the most current information on the politics, economics and legal matters involving the state's funding of public education.

October 19, 2015 6:45am-8:45am

Rosie O'Grady's

800 Seventh Ave., at 52nd St. New York,

NY Cost: \$50.00 per person

Featuring Panelists

E.J. McMahon

President of the Empire Center for Public Policy

David Sciarra

Executive Director, Education Law Center

Tammy Gamerman

Citizens Budget Commission

RSA Registration Form / Invoice ~ Trustee and Superintendent Breakfast Forum

October 19, 2015 6:45am-8:45 am

Rosie O'Grady's (Seating is Limited)

800 Seventh Ave., at 52nd St. New York, NY

Cost: \$50.00 per person

District: _____

Trustee Name (s): _____

Superintendent Name: _____

Reservation Deadline– September 15 or until program is full.

Please return completed form with check to:

Rural Schools Association

275 Flex Warren Hall

Cornell University

Ithaca, NY 14853

Email: NAM33@cornell.edu TEL: (607)255-8709 FAX: (607)254-2896

Cancellation refunds cannot be granted after 10/9.