



TESTIMONY

Governor's Commission on Education
North Country Hearing
Lake Placid Convention Center

August 28, 2012
1:00 – 4:00 p.m.

Please accept this testimony on behalf of the North Country “contingent” of District Superintendents:

- Craig King, Champlain Valley Educational Services
- Stephen Shafer, Franklin-Essex-Hamilton BOCES
- Thomas Burns, St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES

The District Superintendents are regional educational leaders and liaisons to the state education department, as well as the CEOs of the regional educational service centers, or BOCES. You have one of the finest on your commission: Dr. Jessica Cohen of Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES, also the Chair Emeritus of our group. Dr. Cohen can provide perspective on our unique roles and responsibilities within the educational system.

We would like to offer three main areas of focus for the Commission:

1. Fixing Inequalities in the School Funding System
2. Adding Regional School Districts as an option in New York State
3. Graduation Requirements in NYS, creating multiple pathways.

Fixing New York's Inequitable School Funding System

The District Superintendents are well aware of the severity of the state's fiscal situation. We also acknowledge the efforts of both the Governor and the Legislature to get the state's financial house in order. Therefore, in this forum we will not request additional funding but offer areas where the state might deploy resources more effectively to improve outcomes statewide.

The North Country District Superintendents would like to propose the following, to provide more equitable funding to drive scarce educational dollars to the students, programs, and schools that need them the most:

1) Support a More Efficient and Effective Foundation Aid.

As outlined below in the Regents State Aid Proposal for 2012-13 the Foundation Aid phase in must be accelerated. The concepts expressed remain relevant as we move into 2013-14.

With Foundation Aid frozen since 2009-10 and two years of cuts in General Support for Public Schools (GSPS) using the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) method, the progress that was made during the first two years of the Foundation Aid phase-in has been eroded.

The cap on GSPS will limit the increase in new State revenues available to school districts to about \$805 million (the capped maximum) less the increase in GSPS aids and grants (including the State's share of expense-based aids and the annual portion of the competitive grant programs), resulting in approximately \$400 - \$500 million for allocation to school districts. This amount is insufficient to support the elimination of the 2012-13 proposed \$2.6 billion GEA and re-start the phase-in of the foundation formula. A multi-year approach is needed to restore the "foundation" to Foundation Aid.

Therefore, while funding options available within the Regents State Aid proposal are limited, definitive steps need to be taken to simplify the approach to funding school districts in 2012-13 and to make the distribution of funding more progressive. It is proposed that amount of aid districts received in 2011-12 for Foundation Aid, High Tax Aid, Academic Enhancement Aid and Supplemental Excess Cost Aid less the GEA reduction provide the Foundation Aid base for moving forward and that any funds available within the State Aid cap be used to restart the Foundation Aid phase-in with a new target for full phase-in set for 2019-20. The approach is similar to when Foundation Aid was created in 2007-08 by consolidating a number of categorical aids. In addition, the Foundation Aid formula should be updated with more current enrollment numbers, measures of student need and regional cost index.¹

2) Eliminate the Combined Wealth Ratio Floor.

Currently, the formula treats all school districts with combined wealth ratios of .6 or lower the same. All school districts with a CWR below .6 are short changed. The actual CWR should be used for these districts.

3) Eliminate Bullet Aid.

This funding lacks a formula or set of criteria. This budget year \$30 million will be distributed in this manner. This money should be applied to the purposes outlined in items one and two above.

The Regional School District: Another Option for School District Organization

School districts across the state are facing unprecedented challenges. Fiscal insolvency, financial insolvency, or both are a real possibility for many districts. The traditional consolidation models are not appealing to most districts and consequently there have been few mergers in recent decades.

A regional school district that would allow schools and communities to maintain their identity, expand educational opportunities, and achieve financial savings may be more appealing to certain communities than the traditional merger model, a regional high school, tuitioning out high school students, or sharing a superintendent.

A regional school district that allows school districts to merge, while continuing to operate all schools in the merging districts will save money, appeal to voters, and provide opportunities to expand options for students. While it is permissible to have multiple schools serving the same grade levels in a single district, NYSED representatives have indicated that they would likely not authorize a merger vote unless a single high school was going to be established. This is understandable under the current incentive aide level. A reduced, but still significant incentive aid package should be put in place for regional school districts.

Expanded Options for Students

- Ease of sharing staff between schools – possibly in a block schedule arrangement
- Distance Learning/Video Conferencing in a consistent bell schedule format
- Option for themed/magnet schools
- Enhanced Extra-Curricular, Co-Curricular offerings

Cost Savings

A Regional School District will achieve cost savings in several areas

- One business office
- One transportation system
- One Operations and Maintenance Department
- One set of staff to submit data to SED
- One Superintendent
- One Board of Education
- Ability to flex attendance zones based on student population shifts
- Ability to retain, close or add schools as needed over time

Appeal to Voters

- Retain the identity of existing schools
- Immediate Cost Savings
- Enhanced resources of a larger district

Incentive Aid

A reasonable incentive aid methodology is critical to the success of a Regional School District initiative. Given the local control that will be maintained on the number of school buildings, it is unlikely that incentive aid will be as favorable as the current incentive for merger. That being said, it is essential that a meaningful incentive be provided to entice districts to seriously consider this option. Consideration of the size or student population in the new Regional School District may be part of the solution in setting a reasonable incentive aid structure, however, student population should not be the sole factor as this will disadvantage sparsely populated rural districts, particularly those that encompass a large land area.

Voter Authorization

Serious consideration should be given to allow authorization by a majority of voters in the proposed regional school district. The current merger voting procedures of requiring a majority in all districts often allows a minority of the overall voters to thwart the will of the majority.

Possible Scenario for Board of Education Structure

- Ex. 1 Two districts forming the Regional School District
 - 2 members from within the respective boundaries of the two dissolving districts
 - 1, 3 or 5 at large members
- Ex. 2 Three districts forming the Regional School District
 - 1 member each from within the respective boundaries of the three dissolving districts
 - 2, 4 or 6 at large members
- Ex. 3 Five districts forming the Regional School District
 - 1 member each from within respective boundaries of the five dissolving districts
 - 0, 2 or 4 at large members

Hypothetical Regional School Districts

(There is no expressed commitment by districts in the FEH BOCES region to date and these examples are for illustrative purposes and to promote further dialog.)

Ex. 1 Two districts

District	K-12 Enrollment	Tax Rate on True
A	292	17.56
B	806	16.13

The two districts currently share a superintendent and several other services, but have exhausted the opportunities for financial savings. The current shared superintendent has done an excellent job, but finding a replacement when she departs in June 2013 will be a tall order. The current arrangement does not address the superintendent workload, issues of multiple collective bargaining units, creating two separate budgets, working with two boards of education, etc.

Ex. 2 Three Districts

District	K-12 Enrollment	Tax Rate on True
A	703	6.49
B	1356	8.69
C	817	11.70

All three districts operate in a traditional manner currently

Ex. 3 Five Districts

District	K-12 Enrollment	Tax Rate on True
A	292	17.56
B	806	16.13
C	550	13.61
D	2313	15.30
E	1471	11.88

Two districts have significant sharing underway as noted above. The other three districts currently operate in a traditional format.

If the Commission is inclined to give this concept serious review, there are a number of items to consider. This list is certainly not all inclusive, but does raise several key areas that will need to be addressed.

- How do districts with significantly different tax rates mitigate financial harm to tax payers in the district(s) with the lower tax rate on true value?

- How can the foundation formula, building aid ratio and BOCES aid ratio be adjusted to protect large enrollment high need districts when merging with smaller enrollment average/low need districts?
- How are the collective bargaining units integrated in a manner that is fair, rather than simply leveling up when creating a new collective bargaining agreement?
- How will significant consolidation under this scenario impact the number of BOCES and the geographic territory served by each BOCES?

Traditional mergers and regional high schools are two solutions for school district organization. Traditional merger options should be retained and regional high school enabling legislation should be passed and signed into law. These two options, however, will not work in certain areas and a third option for regional school districts as outlined here should be enacted. Your serious consideration of this proposal will positively impact the ongoing review of school district organization options.

Graduation Requirements in New York State

To be college and career ready, what courses and examinations should students be required to take and pass to be eligible for a Regents diploma? An advanced Regents diploma?

How can we more effectively engage students in learning by providing them with opportunities to pursue individual interests while earning credit toward a Regents diploma?

College and career readiness requires basic competency in English language arts, math, science and social studies as well as the development of skills that are required to succeed in post-secondary college and career.

The current graduation requirements require students to take and pass a series of five Regents examinations. Note that under federal law, high school students are required to take a minimum of three state assessments: one in English Language Arts, one in Mathematics, and one in Science. Use of those exams for graduation requirements is a state decision. New York also chose to add American history (Grade 11 Social Studies) and Global Studies (9th and 10th grade course concluding with an examination at the end of 10th grade) as additional requirements for a Regents diploma.

To create multiple pathways for New York students, we must determine basic requirements for graduation and then an additional requirement for a sequence of courses that would reflect and capture student interest in a subject matter and encourage deeper engagement in learning.

For example: the requirement for a Regents diploma could include the mandated federal examinations in ELA, math and science, one year of American history and one year of global studies as well as a sequence in humanities including 3-4 social studies courses; in STEM, including a math/science sequence of 3-4 courses; in Art, including a sequence of 3-4 Art courses; in CTE, requiring completion of a 2 year CTE program sequence; in Literature including a sequence of 3-4 courses: an advanced Regents diploma would be awarded to students completing the required exams at mastery level and demonstrating mastery in two sequences of study.

The basic requirements would be measured by a Regents examination and sequences could be measured by a combination of Regents examinations and other examinations including AP, industry, trade, licensing or locally prepared examinations.

So long as students satisfy the minimum graduation requirement (5 equity exams meeting psychometric standards) any pathway a school builds to specialized diplomas (I.E. humanities, literature, career technical education, STEM, the arts) would exceed (and therefore) satisfy this minimum. This would encourage school districts to offer a broad range of opportunities to students designed to satisfy basic requirements but also to engage students in a deeper sequence of study in an area of interest. It would address the growing de-emphasis on the arts and the current trend of disinvesting in CTE and STEM courses as “superfluous” because they are “not required” to graduate.

As for the current Global History examination:

A test based on two years of content is not a valid assessment tool. The negative effects around high-stakes testing and the proliferation of "teaching to the test" are compounded in a two- year course. There is currently far too much content crammed into the course with little room for deeper learning and understanding of specific eras, events, geography, or cultures. In an era of teacher accountability based on student performance on such examinations, consider that 10th grade teachers often must re-teach 9th grade material and are held more directly accountable for what may be deficiencies in 9th grade teaching.

The current Global History test is inherently flawed and should be replaced by two, one year courses of study with two separate examinations. Passing one of these examinations should be required for a Regents diploma.

One of the two resulting courses should focus on world geography integrated with contemporary world events, geo-political and economic issues and culture. This would be designed to prepare students to be "global citizens" rather than historians.

The second course would be developed to focus on global history seeking an alternative to the current “survey approach” which calls for rote memorization of dates, people and events does not necessarily improve global awareness or facilitate global citizenship and engagement. This course could provide opportunities to learn more deeply about particular cultures and how they have shaped and influenced world history.