

Testimony

For the Consideration of the New York State Education Commission

*Viola Schmid-Doyle, NBCT
Canton Central School District
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Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to share some observations and the following recommendations concerning the impact of inequitably distributed resources:

1. **Fix the funding formula**
2. **Create a mechanism to allow for responsive (i.e., prompt) small scale variances in mandates/categorical fund use**
3. **Allow schools to propose alternative sources of income**
4. **In evaluating school systems, include as a variable the de facto role that schools play in addressing socio-economic issues in underserved communities**

This past year, in the AP Government course that I teach, we studied the policy-making process, budgets and social welfare policy. My students discovered that they were in the thick of a social welfare policy issue that resonated deeply.

It was about the time that many of them were having college interviews. They discovered that the cuts that have been occurring for the past several years, and which were being considered again this year, had left them at a serious disadvantage when they were being compared with students from other parts of the state. Over the course of their time in high school, classes like Acting, Aquaculture, Early Child Education, Child Psychology, business courses, Principles of Engineering, Creative Writing, Psychology, Current Events, and Spanish V had been cut, in many cases to save money and cover for the loss of staff necessitated by significant reductions in state aid. In meeting with policy makers, they discovered that the losses they were facing were not being faced equally across the state. This, they believed, was unfair. They were off into a tremendous authentic learning experience. One girl started a Facebook Group and over the course of a couple of weeks, its membership grew to 900. They held assemblies during lunch, made appointments to speak to legislators and gave interviews to the local media. Soon, they discovered more than they ever wanted to know about factors that influenced the state aid formula, including Combined Wealth Ratios (CWR), poverty rates, and Gap Elimination Adjustments (GEA). And it was apparent that our school was in crisis.

Our school is located in a small college town and has a student population of about 1,350 students, all housed on one campus with elementary, middle and high schools in separate wings of the same building. About 75% of our Middle and High School students are involved in extra-curricular activities at any given time during the year and our school is regularly recognized as a top ranked school in surveys such as those done by Newsweek. Unfortunately, in 2012-13 our staff will be about three-fourths (3/4th) of what it was just three years ago, and as a result of inequitably distributed state aid cuts, we have fallen off of a cliff: We are no longer a rural school that provides a sound education but a school struggling to survive. What does this mean for our students?

It means that the precious time so instrumental in making personal connections with students is taken up by other responsibilities. Some of these are a result of services that are now shared and therefore less accessible, and others reflect the reality that we no longer have the support staff. Consider: loss of a school nurse, a librarian, a guidance counselor, a substance abuse counselor, an educational technology coordinator, the dean of students, and custodians. Alternative programs for at-risk youth have been cut, the consultant teaching model to address special education needs has been curtailed and the instructional team approach at the 7th and 8th grade levels has been gutted to balance our budget in the face of inequitable reductions in state aid. With these programs gone, we lose the crucial personal connections with kids that help to put everyone (parents, teachers, students) on the same page, while still other demands grow, as result of increased class size.

To illustrate what triage looks like:

Over the course of the past few days I have had several emails from our Guidance Counselor stating that several students didn't pass a Regents Exam or take a course in summer school and we lack personnel to provide support, even the mandated AIS. She asks if I would be able to take them into my classes (which are already full) and prepare them for the January regents.

An increase in class size increases the average number of students per class by 7, or a total of about 40 extra students per day in a typical high school schedule. This means that each time I assign a writing task or performance-based task, assuming it takes only five minutes to grade and comment, the time required per assignment has increased by 3.5 hours. The reality is that, Common Core notwithstanding, my students will have less feedback with a personal touch, if not less writing practice. What about interaction with students during classes themselves? Careful consideration must be given to monitor and support groups as effectively as there are now about 2 additional groups, for a total of 8-10 groups per class. Many teachers, including me, have an increased number of courses for which to prepare. For me, staying current in Global History, US History, and AP Government, while providing 21st century learning experiences with a Common Core literacy emphasis, is in itself a challenge. Our music educators have as many as 10 different preparations. At this point, quality of instruction suffers greatly.

Shared staff in our three buildings creates a loss of teacher contact time, because of travel time needed for areas like computers, instrumental lessons, art, music, PE, and nursing services. Certainly we can't require children as young as four (4) to move on a three (3)-minute passing time. Travel time alone can cut six (6) minutes from a class. ($6 \times 180 \text{ days} = 1040 \text{ minutes} = 27 \text{ lost class periods}$). It doesn't matter if the teacher or the student travels. There is still lost time. Instead of student need dictating program, schedules are. There are only so many periods a day that we can offer a class when there are so many additional responsibilities added to the teachers' plates. Even though a student may benefit from a particular ELA elective, the one period it may be offered conflicts with a required course. We attempt to avoid this when possible, but with less staff, it has become increasingly difficult to avoid.

Who pays? In the short term and long term, the student pays dearly because there are fewer responsible adults providing instruction and support. Consider what happens when no one is there to clarify confusion on homework, listen to students when they talk about a fight at home, the depression they feel, the boyfriend abuse, or the bullying in the bathroom. In the long term, the societal and economic capacity of our New York State is negatively impacted.

As the former Dean of Students at Canton (my position was eliminated this upcoming year, having been cut to half-time last year), I am very familiar with the struggle to marshal resources to support our children in crisis. The

economic downturn has reduced already limited resources, and increased socio-economic chaos in the community. I recall a student who was on my radar by the end of last September due to excessive absences, drug use and anger issues. However, every support service provider in our school was struggling to keep pace with the increasing needs and demands, not to mention the roll-out of new mandates. I was teaching half time, in addition to the responsibility of Dean of Students in both the high school and the adjoining middle school. By the time we had completed multiple student and parent outreach attempts and CSE adjustments, it was December, and high time for a PINS petition. This was completed and by mid-spring, the student was in the program. It was July before Family Court finally met to address the issue. The full school year was lost, and I fear that the consequences will be much longer term than just one school year. I wish I could tell you that this was the only situation in which our staff struggled to be able to do what a student needed because we lacked the time to meet or coordinate, or because the resources themselves were inadequate.

What will the situation described above do to our drop-out rate? And why is an average needs school facing this kind of crisis? My AP Government students and I discovered that one of the biggest reasons is that the way the state aid formula has been adjusted to balance the state’s budget is flawed. It makes average and high needs districts bear a disproportionate share of the burden. In addition, there is a lack of responsiveness at the state level due to an overly generalized understanding of diverse local realities. In light of those realities, I have the following recommendations to make:

1. Fix the funding formula

- a. **Adopt the Board of Regents proposal to eliminate the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA).** The GEA requires those districts least able to afford it to sacrifice their resources and cuts the very programs which their communities need. To illustrate the inequitable reduction in caused by the GEA, consider the fact that over three years, Canton, which has around 50% of the resource capacity of the average school in New York State, has lost 41% more than the state average per pupil, and 71% more per pupil than a similar sized WEALTHIER district!!!:

Year	Canton GEA (per pupil)	State Average GEA (per pupil)	GEA (per pupil) for a similar-sized district in a low-needs community
2010-2011 ¹	-\$1333 (-\$880) ²	-\$881 (-\$582)	-\$470 (-\$310)
2011-2012	-\$1,797	-\$1024	-\$469
2012-2013	-\$1639	-\$947	-\$456
Total	-\$4769 (-\$4316)	-\$2852(-\$2553)	-\$1395(-\$1235)

This table shows the per pupil Gap Elimination Adjustment amounts for the Canton and a similar-size school district in a wealthier community (CWR ca. 1.8) as well as the statewide average for the 2010-11, 2011-12 and 2012-13 fiscal years. These figures do not include the Big 5 school districts of Buffalo, New York City, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers. Source: NYSSBA/NYSED

- b. **Address the problems with the inequitable Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) and the Foundation Aid Formula that utilizes the Combined Wealth Ratio (CWR) and measures of Poverty such as Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL).** Our school has a CWR of .517 of the average school in New York State (1.0); and a FRPL of over 41%, yet we remain inequitably and insufficiently funded. There are schools which

¹ DRA – Deficit Reduction Adjustment (what the GEA was called in 2010-2011)

² The reductions listed in () for the 2010-11 school year reflect the SFSF Restoration. For the 2010-11 school year, 33.9521 percent of the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) was restored to each district through Federal ARRA funding of the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund. The reductions listed in () in 2010-11 show the Net Gap Elimination Adjustment per pupil, which is the sum of the Gap Elimination Adjustment and the SFSF Restoration.

have multiple times the average level of resources (i.e. 4.0+) which are funded as if they have only an average level of resources.

- c. **Use current numbers when developing the formula.** Our district's poverty rate jumped from 13% to 23% between the 2000 and 2010 census, an indicator of increasing need in the community.³
 - d. **Consider the impact of property that is off the tax roll.** Universities, state and local governmental facilities benefit the community in many ways, but do not pay the property taxes from which our local funding is derived.
 - e. **Create a graduated reduction rather than a precipice for districts at the low end of the average needs category.** Our school is on the low end of the average needs category. Were our school simply recategorized as a high needs district, the GEA funding cut would not have been able to exceed 6.8% of estimated expenditures. Our 2012-13 GEA funding cut was 10.78% of those estimated expenditures. Had it been calculated at 6.8%, our GEA funding cut would have been \$946, 000, or \$770 per pupil *less* than it actually was. Perhaps we would not have lost 23 positions, and thus had more of the needed resources for our students had we been recategorized to reflect our lack of resources.
2. **Create a mechanism to allow for responsive (i.e., prompt) small scale variances in mandates, and shifting of funds earmarked for those mandates into more necessary and/or productive uses, rather than thinking of mandate reform only on the global policy level.** There is a need for efficient and personal connection in Albany so that decision-making is shared. We need an advocate in Albany who has a solid understanding of local concerns and the ability to navigate the bureaucracy efficiently to cut through red tape. The current model looks more like imperialism, in which the decisions come down to better the lives of the locals in the way the distant overlords see fit. Please forgive a social studies teacher's analogy. On the one hand, the state is asking us to think outside the box, to innovate, but on the other hand, the state wants to retain control and stifles innovation in the public sector. As a colleague pointed out to me, mandated programs are often times less effective than non-mandated programs when it comes to keeping kids in school because these top-down reforms lack the ability to tailor to students' individual needs. At the same time, the kinds of non-mandated programs that can prepare students for viable careers or life skills have been cut or threatened. Some examples from our school are the aquaculture program, sports marketing class, child development, and principles of engineering. And bear in mind, these programs have not lacked enrollment, but our school needed to cut programs to balance the budget, and non-mandated programs are cut first.
 3. **Allow schools to propose alternative sources of income,** whether it is through the inclusion of foreign students paying per pupil tuition, or use of advertising space. This recommendation would require provisions for local oversight and stakeholder groups to determine whether a given entrepreneurial approach is advisable and to assess risks.
 4. **In evaluating school systems, include as a variable the de facto role that schools play in addressing socio-economic issues in underserved communities.**
 - a. In poor rural communities, private sector job growth and development hinges on public sector jobs and infrastructure. For example, the universities in St. Lawrence County attract faculty and staff in part through the assurance of sound services. A strong public school system is crucial.

³ Data specific to Canton Central courtesy of the Canton Central School District Office.

- b. Students facing socio-economic challenges come to school and bring those issues through the school doors. The school is at the front lines in encountering and addressing their needs. In fact some students come to school because that is the only place where their needs are met. When non-school-based social and medical resources are cut or limited due to a lack of private and/or public sector resources, there is an increased burden on the school's resources that is difficult to document. Bear this in mind when assessing the value added to a community by a school.
- c. Recognize the significance of the public schools in rural communities because relatively low population/customer base leads to a lower level of return on investment, discouraging private investment or service providers. Issues of rural demographics, geography and transportation that are obstacles to other types of service providers increase the range of services a public school provides to a community because it is infrastructure that is already in place.

I firmly believe that rural schools, such as ours, are exactly where we should be investing our education dollars. The proverbial bang for the buck is huge. We are small enough to make a difference in kids' everyday lives and large enough, if properly funded, to create a solid educational foundation. Our kids benefit from an efficient and committed school staff and our community benefits by having a community center. There is no double dipping of tax dollars when it comes to offering services for our youth. Rural schools ARE the services.

Viola Schmid-Doyle is a National Board certified teacher of Social Studies at the Canton Central School District, and a former Fulbright Exchange teacher who lived and taught in Germany in 2004-05 and Austria in 1993-94. More recently, she has worked as Summer School Principal for the St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES in Canton and Massena, NY, and as Dean of Students for the Canton Central School District. Providing opportunities to all students has become a priority in her work with students in a variety of settings. The issue of equity of educational funding was raised by students in her AP Government class as a consequence of their experiences in college interviews, when the losses they have sustained over the course of their high school careers became apparent. As a parent, she hopes that her own children will have access to a variety of opportunities so they can likewise achieve to their potential.