



WATKINS GLEN CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

EST. 1863

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To the Rockefeller Institute:

The Watkins Glen Central School District, serving approximately 915 students in the picturesque Southern Finger Lakes region, has encountered several challenges in recent years. Known for the world-famous Watkins Glen International, fine wines, and scenic beauty, our district has experienced a significant decline in student enrollment since the large graduating class of 2000, when we had 1,475 students. Enrollment reached its lowest point shortly after the 2020 pandemic closure but has begun to rise slightly since then.

Despite this modest increase, several factors—including lower birth rates, a shortage of affordable housing, and high demand for vacation properties—indicate that our enrollment numbers will not return to the levels of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The state's foundation aid formula, which relies heavily on the 2000 enrollment figures, further complicates our financial situation.

While our district is situated in a region known for its scenic beauty and high property values, the lack of affordable housing means that our perceived wealth does not fully reflect the realities faced by our students. The recent increase in assessed property values has resulted in one of the lowest tax rates in New York State.

The district has adapted to these changes through various strategies:

Campus Consolidation:

In 2013, we consolidated our schools into a single PK-12 campus, reducing our facilities' size by approximately 35% through the closure of our historic Middle School building in the center of our community. Despite our strong commitment to middle-level education, our governance team recognized the need to adjust to declining enrollment. Although challenging in many ways, this decision has enabled our district to utilize resources more efficiently.

Workforce Management:

Since the closure of our Middle School, we have managed staffing through attrition, choosing not to rehire positions as they become vacant if enrollment does not support them. This approach has enabled us to manage our workforce effectively without resorting to layoffs. Enrollment drives all instructional staffing decisions.

Maintaining Educational Standards:

Despite the reductions, we remain committed to providing a high-quality education. Our course offerings continue to be rigorous and competitive, ensuring that our students receive a strong educational foundation.



UNITED, WE SOAR.

Increased Needs and Funding Challenges:

In recent years, the needs of our students, particularly those with disabilities and other complex requirements, have increased significantly, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic. During this period, federal pandemic relief funding played a crucial role in helping our district meet these rising needs. This funding enabled us to reach staffing levels that adequately supported our students and the community, ensuring that we could provide essential services and maintain educational standards.

However, the proposed reduction in foundation aid posed a severe challenge. The Executive Budget Proposal reduced funding to WGCS D by \$1.9 million. In order to close this gap, the district would have had to increase the local tax levy by 17%, which is neither feasible nor acceptable. This cut would have necessitated eliminating much-needed faculty and staff, undermining our ability to offer vital programs and support services. The loss of such funding would have made it difficult to sustain our current staffing levels, adversely affecting our ability to address the diverse and growing needs of our student population.

Our Recommendations:

Data Accuracy:

Use current and accurate enrollment data to drive the new funding formula. The utilization of 2000 census data does not provide an accurate and current portrait of our district.

Additionally, inflation has had a major impact on all aspects of our organization, from the increased costs of goods and services to the demand for higher wages in the collective bargaining process.

Increased Needs:

School districts are expected to serve a larger role in our communities than ever before. This is increasingly the case in rural New York. In addition to educational services, students attend school to eat healthy meals and have their physical and mental health monitored. An updated funding formula should reflect these needs.

Fairness and Equity:

If reductions must be made, those cuts should be felt equally across the board. Though our district appears wealthy on paper, the cuts proposed in the executive budget were not equitable. The measures it would have taken to close the aforementioned budget gap would have been crippling to our school community.

In summary:

While Watkins Glen Central School District has navigated declining enrollment through strategic adjustments, the rising complexity of student needs and potential funding cuts pose significant challenges. We remain committed to continuing our efforts to provide excellent education despite these difficulties.

Our goal is for this information to enable the Institute to review our case with a critical lens, recognizing that property values and declining enrollment do not fully capture the true needs of our complex rural school community. Our challenges have reached an unprecedented level, demanding a more nuanced understanding and accurate and equitable adjustment to the foundation aid formula.

With respect and gratitude,

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