

**Rockefeller Institute of Government
Foundation Aid Formula Study
Public Forum
Guilderland High School
August 14, 2024**

Submitted Written Public Testimony

Thank you to President Robert Megna and the Rockefeller Institute for their work in studying this critical issue regarding the state foundation aid funding formula for our public schools.

I am currently in my 18th year as a Superintendent of Schools, serving in two very different types of school districts, currently in my 9th year as Superintendent of the East Greenbush Central Schools, an average wealth district in Rensselaer County which serves approximately 4000 students and I previously served as Superintendent in the Rome City Schools in the Mohawk Valley, a high needs/low resource district.

As a Superintendent I have experience leading school systems and communities during periods in which aid reductions at the state level significantly impacted school districts, communities, community employment levels and most importantly the students:

A lot has changed in schools since the Foundation Aid Formula was enacted in 2007.

There was no tax cap in 2007. The foundation aid formula includes an **expected local contribution**. Given the current tax cap formula, this contribution amount may not align with the community's expectations. Expressed another way, based on potential changes to the formula, the amount of money expected to be contributed by the local taxpayers could exceed the amount that the school district can raise through the tax levy with a simple majority vote.

Historically, schools have struggled to gain community support for budgets which exceed the cap. East Greenbush tax cap this year was .55% which yields only \$327,000 in revenue to our school district.

Any recommendations regarding changes to the foundation aid formula should be coupled with increased flexibility for schools regarding the tax cap formula.

Policymakers at the state level should not always infer that reduced student enrollment equates to reduced student needs which can be translated into smaller budgets. It is not a straight line. In all districts, regardless of size, demographics or type of district, student needs have increased regardless of enrollment.

One small example: Since 2007, when the formula was developed to include a Pupil Needs Index, East Greenbush's free and reduced lunch percentage was 11 % . It is now 22 % . It has doubled since the inception of the foundation aid formula.

Student mental health needs, special education needs and English as a New Language (ENL) support needs have increased. Since 2016, when I became Superintendent of East Greenbush, the number of ENL teachers has increased from 3 to 8 positions in order to meet federal and state mandated services. During this same period, the total number of social workers has increased from 5 to 9 to address growing student behavioral and mental health needs.

As you study the numbers and the needs, we may need to step back from expenses and revenues and start with the question:

Does a Sound Basic Education today mean the same thing as it did in 2007?

- Does a Sound Basic Education include support to address increased student mental health needs or alternative programs for children with unique learning or behavioral needs?
- What about expanded pathways in areas such as Career and Technical Education, workplace learning, Early College High School and advanced College Level and AP courses?
- Students also learn a lot of skills through extracurricular activities such as arts, clubs and sports. Are these activities included with the funding of a Sound Basic Education?
- What about early childhood and universal Pre K? Why can't every family have their 4 year old in a Pre-K program? Shouldn't Pre K children be counted in the aid formula?

Students, families and communities have come to expect these offerings as part of their child's Sound Basic Education. Our NYS Education Department has challenged us to expand available pathways for students.

Will schools receive the funds from the state needed to provide and sustain these programs or will the local taxpayers need to pick up the difference?

Out of necessity and consideration of changing student and family needs, all school districts are doing more to serve children and families than ever before.

What was once considered "extra" is now essential and an expectation of our communities.

In what ways will the Foundation Aid Formula changes translate these needs into financial support?

Coming back to the tax cap, how can we link changes to the tax cap with formula changes so that our efforts to provide these new basics are not perceived by our communities as overspending?

As you approach this very challenging task ahead, I encourage you to take the long view and preserve predictability and sustainability of funding for schools as part of your recommendations.

I can recall (and still have scars) from the impact of the Deficit Reduction Assessment, the Gap Elimination Adjustment and from the threat of mid year cuts experienced by schools and communities.

Abrupt changes in funding hurt kids and divide communities.

Phasing in your recommended changes including those which may reduce school revenues for some districts provides Superintendents, Boards of Education and communities the time needed to adapt and to plan required systems changes.

Being thoughtful and deliberate through a staged approach puts all of us in a better position to protect our students and to transition and meet the expectations of our communities.

Thank you for listening and for your consideration.