



August 21, 2024

Dear Rockefeller Institute:

Please accept this letter as testimony from the Groton Central School District regarding the present study of New York State's Foundation Aid formula for school districts. The Groton CSD is very appreciative for the opportunity to provide its input on how this formula and funding impacts our local school district.

The mechanism for providing adequate funding for public school systems is not just based on the value a constituency places on public education - it is based in law. The New York Constitution instructs the Legislature to provide for a system of free K-12 public schools wherein all children of the state may be educated. In 1993, the state's educational financing system was further defined under the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) when the Foundation Aid Formula was created to distribute aid based on student need and close the spending gap between districts. The formula was to take into account a school district or city's ability to raise money through local property taxes. Fast forward to 2024 and the state finds itself using a formula based on census data from 2000, and without regard for changes to the educational funding landscape that have occurred over the past 30 years (i.e. the tax cap).

Since 2000, New York State has suffered significant population loss, as reflected in the dropping enrollment numbers for most districts across the state. At the same time, there has been a ballooning in special education costs for students with disabilities, a factor only compounded by the fact that the state's special education classification rates have increased significantly as well. (According to recent data from the Empire Center, NYS's classification rate has gone from 13.4% to over 19% in the past 20 years and, as of 2019, accounted for 24% of total funding costs in education.) Simultaneously, NYS requires over 200 mandates that go beyond the requirements of IDEA, which only serves to drive the costs even higher. The present foundation aid formula fails to take into account these escalating costs.

Any change to the formula needs to include increased weighting in the Students With Disabilities (SWD) formula factor. In addition, there must be an increase in the adjusted foundation aid amount (FA) to reflect more realistic costs of educating a single child, as the mission of school districts has increased simply beyond inflation. For instance, the Groton Central School District now provides wrap-around health care to our families through school physicals, mental health counseling, and dental services. In addition, we provide students with College and Career Readiness skills, Digital Literacy in Computer Science, Social-Emotional Learning standards, Next Generation Science Standards, college planning (including completing the FAFSA form), bullying/cyber-bullying education and prevention programming, character education programming, and STEAM-based curriculum/courses to ensure our students can compete for 21st century jobs upon graduation.

All of these additional requirements cost the district tens of thousands of dollars and are hard to make up at the local levy, given the Groton Central School District's present tax levy only brings in an additional

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\$68,000 in revenue per 1%. With a combined wealth ratio score of .50, a poverty rate of 51% districtwide, and a median home value of \$180,000 the community is not in a financial position to make up for a loss in aid through local tax dollars.

Although the Groton CSD does not have a clear solution to how school aid should be distributed across the state, we do believe that the future foundation aid formula should be distributed to districts based on student needs and local capacity and be calculated using updated poverty estimates and regional cost measures for a more accurate assessment of district need. Considering the state has implemented a tax cap that puts further restrictions on a district's ability to raise revenue locally, the formula must rationally determine the level of support for Save Harmless districts like the Groton CSD that is based upon wealth and demographics of students in order to ensure equitable access to education regardless of one's zip code. Finally, we urge the Institute to consider the need school districts have for consistency when it comes to preparing annual budgets, and any formula that can provide a level of predictability would greatly be appreciated.

In closing, we thank the Rockefeller Institute for its time and consideration of the concerns of the Groton Central School District as it moves towards finalizing its report on the Foundation Aid formula for the Governor. We look forward to viewing its findings in early December.

Sincerely,



Margo Martin
Superintendent
Groton Central School District

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