

As the Superintendent of the Highland Central School District, I appreciate the opportunity to provide input on the ongoing review of the New York State Foundation Aid formula. This formula has long been a cornerstone of equitable education funding in our state, and its refinement is crucial to ensuring that all students, regardless of their background or geographic location, have access to a high-quality education.

The Foundation Aid formula was designed to address disparities in funding across school districts by allocating state resources based on need. It considers factors such as student poverty, English language learners, and regional cost differences. However, as our state's demographics and economic conditions have evolved, so too must our approach to school funding.

While the Foundation Aid formula has made significant strides toward equity, gaps remain. Many districts, particularly those in rural and urban areas, continue to struggle with insufficient funding to meet the diverse needs of their students. I encourage the Committee to consider adjustments that more accurately reflect the true cost of educating students in high-need areas.

The data and metrics used in the current formula are outdated. The Committee should consider incorporating more recent data on student enrollment, poverty levels, and cost-of-living variations. Additionally, the formula should include provisions for rapidly changing district demographics to ensure that funding levels are responsive to current needs.

School districts require predictability and stability in funding to plan effectively and maintain educational programs. The current fluctuations in Foundation Aid create challenges for long-term planning. A revised formula should include mechanisms that provide districts with greater certainty regarding future funding levels.

The increasing number of English language learners and students requiring special education services necessitates additional support. The Foundation Aid formula must be adjusted to better reflect the higher costs associated with educating these students, ensuring they receive the resources they need to succeed.

The cost of living and operating schools varies significantly across New York State. The formula should be recalibrated to ensure that districts in higher-cost areas receive adequate funding to cover their expenses, without penalizing those in lower-cost regions.

The "Save Harmless" policy has been a vital safeguard for districts facing declining enrollment or other demographic shifts. This policy ensures that no district receives less aid than in previous years, providing essential stability. Eliminating or reducing this safeguard could have devastating consequences for districts that are already struggling to meet the needs of their students. I strongly encourage the Committee to preserve the "Save

Harmless" policy within the Foundation Aid formula to protect the educational opportunities for students in these vulnerable districts.

There has been a narrative suggesting that schools are sitting on large fund balances, but this assumption does not reflect the reality for districts such as Highland. Our district has been fiscally conservative, keeping taxes at the state-mandated tax cap. This leaves little room to fund reserves beyond what is necessary for immediate needs. By no means are we maintaining large amounts in reserves; in fact, we cannot afford to do so. The limited reserves we do have are carefully managed to ensure that we can address unexpected costs without compromising educational quality. I urge the Committee to consider the financial constraints faced by districts like ours and to challenge the misconception that schools are hoarding funds.

The NYS Foundation Aid formula is a critical tool in our mission to provide equitable education to all students. I commend the Rockefeller Institute Committee for undertaking this important review and urge you to consider these recommendations as you work to refine the formula. Our collective goal must be to ensure that every child in New York State, regardless of their zip code, has access to the resources and opportunities they need to succeed.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to continued collaboration as we work together to strengthen our education system for the benefit of all students.

Sincerely,

Joel E. Freer

Superintendent, Highland Central School District