

Dear Rockefeller Institute,

September 3, 2024

My name is Susan Casali, I am Associate Superintendent for the Brookhaven Comsewogue UFSD which is located in Port Jefferson Station. I have been fortunate to serve as the Chief Business Official since 2003. I have watched the district change and grow during that time. We are a low wealth district of only .62 of the New York State Average and we have a direct certified free and reduced lunch count above 30% district wide. It is a true community of caring people.

*I am very concerned that any new formula developed for the allocation of foundation aid, the primary source of state funding for school districts, does not penalize our district as the formula has in the past. The hold harmless formula which was being used in State Aid calculation prior to State Aid being restored over the past 4 years kept the school districts state aid frozen and reduced at times when there was a GAP elimination aid. We were always at a multi-million-dollar deficit. Enrollment did not decrease in Comsewogue and in fact we were forced to stay within the tax cap calculation or risk complete destruction of our budget and the programs we worked so hard to create slowly. Our neighbors had decreased enrollment and the same aid formula which was kept at hold harmless this put our low wealth district at a complete disadvantage. We could not implement the programs that our neighbors were able to implement and keep class sizes at a reasonable number. Students with disabilities are approximately 20% and English language learners are approximately 7%. Although we receive slightly more aid this does not come close to supplementing the need for additional staff to give all students the best education. This increase has increased drastically in our district and the cost of educating those two very important areas has put a strain on our budget.*

Although I agree that the formula needs to be changed to be more equitable for all districts, the formula must not put us at a disadvantage again. We have faced new challenges and by the state Constitution all our students are required to receive a sound basic education which they deserve and the inequity amongst districts ability must be addressed. We are grateful that the legislation has been able to restore the 5-million-dollar aid deficit that we were facing year over year. To put this in perspective that is a 20% loss of state aid we had not been afforded.

*I believe any new formula must address these factors:*

- *district wealth based on regional comparisons and regionally adjusted costs, not statewide numbers. For example, Long Island should be considered a region unto itself and Comsewogue's district wealth should be compared to district wealth on Long Island.*
- *enrollment increases or decreases – but enrollment should not be the overriding factor*
- *special needs populations, ENL populations, and increased mental health programming needs as an aftermath of the pandemic and societal changes over the past several years. These all have added and significant costs for districts.*
- *regionally adjusted costs of state mandates. Again, Long Island should be looked at as a separate region, with its particular (and high) costs factored in.*
- *impacts of changing retirement system contributions, inflation, health insurance and transportation costs.*

*Most importantly, there needs to be consistency of application of the formula so districts can readily project foundation aid levels when preparing annual budgets. Additionally, factors such as district*

*wealth, district populations and regionally adjusted costs need to be updated in a timely fashion so that the formula is never using criteria that are decades old and not relevant to current-day circumstances.*

Thank you for your ongoing support of the Comsewogue School District and the education of our Comsewogue students. It is the collaboration between the district, parents, and the greater Port Jefferson Station community that ensures our children receive the best education possible.

Sincerely,

Susan Casali  
Associate Superintendent