



Otsego Northern Catskills BOCES

Considerations on the Foundation Aid Formula from a Rural Perspective:

White paper overview:

This white paper is based on the testimony offered by the ONC BOCES component superintendents and ONC BOCES leadership at the Rockefeller Institute foundation aid hearing at Laurens CSD on August 8, 2024. The paper starts with a regional overview followed by reflections on the increasing demands on schools, the impact of reduced funding on component districts, and the elements of the foundation aid formula under study by the Rockefeller Institute. This white paper is offered on behalf of the component districts in the ONC BOCES region as we collectively strive to create the conditions for our students to thrive.

Regional overview:

Located in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains, the ONC BOCES region serves approximately 7,000 students in grades preK-12 in nineteen component districts spanning four counties (Otsego, Delaware, Schoharie, and Greene) and 1,660 square miles. The region is comprised of Cherry Valley-Springfield, Cooperstown, Milford, Morris, Edmeston, Laurens, Schenevus, Worcester, Oneonta, Charlotte Valley, South Kortright, Stamford, Margaretville, Andes, Roxbury, Jefferson, Gilboa-Conesville, Hunter-Tannersville, and Windham-Ashland-Jewett. ONC BOCES operates two Career and Technical Education Centers - one in Milford, NY and the other in Grand Gorge, NY. The geography of our region requires the operation of two centers in order to best serve component districts. Currently, an average of 46% of component juniors and seniors learn in BOCES programs. Education, healthcare, and tourism are the main regional economic drivers. Our communities are proud, strong and vibrant yet our communities face issues of an eroding tax base and a steadily decreasing population. The beauty of our region has led to an increase in second home ownership as well as an increase in seasonal rental properties. In some parts of our region, 50-70% of the available housing stock is rental property or second homes which increases property values; often pricing community members out of their own communities. The sustainability and survival of the districts in our region is dramatically impacted by the current re-examination of the foundation aid formula by the Rockefeller Institute. These comments and suggestions are based on the experiences of what it means to learn, lead, and live in the ONC BOCES region.

Increased demands on schools:

Since the inception of the foundation aid formula, districts have faced increasing demands related to student mental health, programs, and operations. These increasing demands come with

very real costs to schools as decisions are made to balance student needs and programs with operating expenses.

Blue Ribbon Commission/graduation measures:

The work of the Blue Ribbon Commission and the proposals focused on transforming graduation measures represents an important and timely reconsideration of how school looks in NYS. The graduation measures work emphasizes the elements of *The Portrait of a Graduate* while reconceiving credits and assessments to ensure equity and access to the best opportunities for all students. In addition, the graduation measures transformations emphasize the importance of CTE for all students. With equity in mind and in support of the graduation measures work, rural schools are challenged by how to align programs and opportunities for students when facing decreased and uncertain funding. Adding to those challenges is the need to recruit and retain not only subject area specialists to provide the minimum mandatory programs but recruiting and retaining CTE instructors at our BOCES centers. Rural districts are challenged with decisions about how to improve, but mostly maintain, student programming while facing rising costs, regulations, and mandates. Districts must grapple with questions about funding allocations; making tough decisions related to funding allocations for programs or for safety - just to identify one possible decision making quandary. The margin of financial and programmatic flexibility is razor thin. New graduation measure priorities will undoubtedly necessitate hiring more staff and the need to respond to major regulatory changes.

To better understand the impact of new mandates on rural schools consider the staffing implications of these mandates. In Charlotte Valley, for example, staff teaches multiple grade levels and courses to fulfill current graduation requirements; the ELA teacher teaches two sections of English 7, one of English 9, two of English 11, and one AIS class which leaves no room for additional course load or elective type classes. This example is the norm for all secondary content areas throughout the district.

Next Generation Standards/Science of Reading:

Curricular demands on schools have dramatically increased since the inception of the foundation aid formula. Not only did districts need to respond to the roll out of the Next Generation Standards and new aligned assessments in core content areas, the Science of Reading is another example of an initiative that will require schools to incur additional expenses for aligned curriculum materials and targeted professional development necessary to implement the model. The commitment to literacy, numeracy, and implementation of the Next Generation Learning standards in the core curricular areas is a priority yet that commitment requires districts to strategically plan for the financial implications of these important initiatives. These increasing demands - designed to support student growth and achievement - must be considered when reviewing and updating the foundation aid formula. The base foundation aid should reflect current requirements and demands in order to ensure that all students are provided access and

opportunity to rigorous curriculum and learning experiences - regardless of zip code or school size while building in the flexibility necessary to manage future initiatives.

Special Education:

The foundation aid formula is designed to ensure that all schools receive the necessary funding to provide a quality education to every student. Special education requires a higher level of resources including specialized staff, tailored instructional materials, and additional support services. According to a report by the Office of the State Comptroller in 2020, the cost to educate a student with a disability is, on average, 84% more expensive than that of a general education student and rising faster than the average cost. Yet, the current formula does not adequately reflect this reality. The weighting for special education in the foundation aid formula is insufficient - leading to a shortfall in funding that directly impacts the quality of education and support all students receive. The reimbursement provided is simply not enough to meet the growing needs of students with Individualized Education Plans and 504 Plans. Special education weighting requires re-examination. In fact, due to the importance and unpredictability of funding special education, that re-examination should include a consideration of whether the foundation aid formula is even the most appropriate place to fund these expenses.

The cost to educate a student with an IEP or a 504 plan has outpaced the adjustments made in the foundation aid formula. This discrepancy places a significant strain on districts who are forced to make difficult decisions that can compromise the educational experiences for students with the greatest needs. For example, if one student with significant needs moves into a district, the cost of educating that student can add over \$50,000 in unanticipated, unbudgeted expenses. A formula that accurately reflects the true cost of special education and provides adequate funding to meet these needs is essential. By modifying the weighting, reimbursement, or funding special education outside of the foundation aid formula, districts can ensure that every student, regardless of their abilities, has access to the resources and support they need to succeed.

Mental health needs:

Students are struggling with mental health issues that were exacerbated by the pandemic. The needs post-pandemic are not decreasing. In fact, the needs of students and families are dramatically increasing while access to resources and providers has declined to unimaginable levels. Our rural communities find themselves in a mental health crisis with increasing needs and declining services. The 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey which is prepared by the Bassett Research Institute indicated 25% of our children have felt hopeless for at least two weeks or more and 14% of students have purposely hurt themselves more than once in the last year. In one of the ONC districts, six suicide attempts were reported in one year. Vulnerable students can wait months for a bed in a pediatric psychiatric unit. Those students needing a higher level of care for medication management are lucky to see a provider in a virtual setting once every six months. Children are hurting and resources are almost non-existent to support them and their families.

Schools are essential players in the provision of services to students and families at a time when funding is reduced and unpredictable.

For example, in Worcester, students live in a 61 square mile attendance zone where 54% of them live in poverty. The district has become a source of meals, social emotional support, after school and summer care, as well as a place for mental health, medical and dental services.

In Morris, students do not have access to even the most basic mental health support. The nearest behavioral health clinic is twenty minutes away and there is no public transportation. While the district partners with Bassett Hospital to run an in-house school based health center, Bassett is unable to hire and retain qualified social workers; cycling through more than half a dozen providers in the last four years. The district budget includes two school counselors and, for a period of time, a grant allowed the district to have a part-time social worker on staff. When that grant ended, the dozens of students receiving care were dropped instantly with little to no viable transition planning. The resources to support this transition are simply not available in the community.

The foundation aid formula must continue to evolve to address the increasing financial burdens on our schools related to mental health resources for students. Schools need sustained and enhanced support from the state to ensure that our schools remain safe havens for learning and growth.

Facilities:

The ongoing effort to maintain and improve our school facilities is top of mind for districts and communities. Unfortunately, recent and anticipated reductions in foundation aid have strained budgets; forcing districts to evaluate even more closely every dollar spent as programmatic mandates and the needs to maintain school facilities increase.

The recent and anticipated reduction in funding comes at a time when costs are steadily increasing - particularly in vendor, work and maintenance contracts which impact operational costs. Yearly repair costs have become increasingly burdensome. These financial strains directly influence a district's ability to effectively maintain school buildings. The impact of funding reductions on districts is felt in terms of repairs, upgrades, and unanticipated capital expenses. For example, Schenevus has needed a roof project for many years. Based on limited funding, the district must invest time and expense to stop the leaks along with other necessary repairs from the annual budget. In addition, districts face significant challenges funding unexpected costs related to repairs and replacements. This year, the district discovered substantial damage and a scarcity of parts needed for repairs to our 40 year old boilers. As a result, the district needed to submit an emergency project to replace the boilers. As an emergency project, the district is required to use cash reserves to fund the project. The project will cost nearly \$1 million - approximately 10% of the district budget.

In addition to the necessary repairs, funding is necessary to enhance our physical infrastructure to support school safety. In Oneonta, as in other districts, the safety infrastructure work includes installing advanced surveillance systems, secured and staffed single points of entry, alarm systems to monitor and control access to our buildings, and communication systems to ensure timely safety related information. These upgrades are crucial for preventing unauthorized access and ensuring a swift response in case of emergencies. Regular drills and education sessions on emergency preparedness empower all staff to respond swiftly and appropriately during crises. However, these safety upgrades and training come with a hefty price tag attached.

In the face of these challenges, districts like Schenevus and Oneonta have been forced to make difficult decisions while prioritizing the district's long-term financial health. Despite these challenges, districts remain dedicated to the upkeep of our school buildings. These investments ensure a safe and functional learning environment for our students. Students deserve an environment that supports their learning and growth; free from the distractions of disrepair.

Elements of the foundation aid formula:

Enrollment:

The [enrollment in our region continues to decline](#). In 2013-14, 8,960 preK-12 students learned in component districts. In 2023-24, preK-12 enrollment dropped to 7,524 students. Average district enrollment in the region dropped from 690 in 2013-14 to 559 in 2023-24. The largest district in the region is Oneonta (1645 students) and the smallest is Andes (75 students). Cooperstown educates 793 students and Cherry Valley-Springfield educates 452 students. Oneonta, Cooperstown, and Cherry Valley-Springfield are the largest districts in the region. The remaining sixteen districts educate fewer than 400 students each. Approximately four students live per square mile in our region. Sparsity poses significant challenges.

The current foundation formula's reliance on enrollment figures to determine school aid is problematic for districts experiencing declining student numbers. Fewer students in schools does not directly translate into reduced costs or aid needs. Many of the districts in the region are state aid dependent. For example, Worcester depends on state aid for 64% of their operating budget. The regulations, requirements, and mandates don't change with smaller enrollment. Consider what happens when a district with enrollment of approximately 400 students faces a reduction of 60 students over six years or if the district reduces by ten students per year over 13 grades. The data indicate a 15% loss in enrollment. If that reduction in enrollment then equals a 15% loss in foundation aid, what is a district to do? District leaders cannot close the one K-12 building; they can't reduce the one principal; they cannot reduce the cost of a nurse; they cannot stop maintaining software or purchasing insurance - the list could go on and on. Instead, the district would be forced to reduce student program offerings.

For the upcoming 2024-25 school year, Worcester anticipates a decline in student enrollment with eight students less than last year on BEDS day. That decrease equates to an approximate future reduction of \$90,000 in aid. However, inflation is continuing to impact districts, costs for

goods and services will increase, mandates will not change, and teacher and support staff will still require negotiated raises. As mandates increase - such as the zero-emission bus mandate - districts like Worcester will be forced to decide between student programs and meeting mandates as aid decreases because of the loss of a few students.

Cherry-Valley Springfield is another example of the impact of enrollment declines. In 2016-17, preK- 12 enrollment was 506 students. The district finished the past school year at 452 students. This decline of approximately 54 students over eight years is significant yet staff cannot be reduced to accommodate this drop without severely impacting the quality of education provided to all students. The district must maintain staffing levels to offer the same support and services to our students to support their academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs.

Operating schools in rural communities comes with real costs that are exaggerated by declining enrollment, geographic/demographic challenges, and an eroding tax base. Simply put, rural districts need support to provide an equitable education for all students. Zip code should not determine equitable access to a rigorous course of study, nor should districts be punished for factors beyond their control as they strive each day to provide the best possible education for all students.

Sparsity Factor:

While the rhetoric of fewer students resulting in less of a need for funding was central to Governor Hochul's 2024-25 budget proposal, the reality for rural schools is the opposite. Sparsity requires stable or increased spending - not less. The sparsity index is part of the pupil need index and is based on enrollment per square mile. The current sparsity indicator in the foundation aid formula is 25 students per square mile. The average number of students per square mile in the ONC BOCES region is **four**.

Roxbury is an example of a district significantly impacted by the sparsity factor. The current calculation does not account for the level of sparsity and the impact on district operations. Roxbury covers 84 square miles. The average number of students per square mile is 2.62. In particular, transportation and related services are impacted by sparsity.

- Roxbury's buses travel approximately 200 miles each day - just to bring students to and from school. This mileage does not include late runs, special education runs, athletics, or field trips. Transportation aid simply does not cover these types of demands caused by sparsity.
- Roxbury's enrollment is approximately 220 students - two of whom, for example, might need occupational therapy or six of whom might need physical therapy. Many rural districts provide these related services through a shared service agreement through BOCES which must recruit and retain related service providers in addition to scheduling those related service providers over a 1660 square mile region. Shared services can be costly— especially when serving a large geographical area. A therapist will likely travel

more than 45 minutes between school districts. In addition, schools are already facing a limited number of available providers.

A fair and thoughtful weighing of the sparsity factor in the formula will allow rural schools to ensure that all student needs are met.

Pupil Needs Index:

The pupil needs index requires study to ensure the formula captures the appropriate weighting for students living in poverty. This calculation must be based on the most up-to-date information about the percentage of students who fall below the poverty line. Poverty impacts the ability of a school to provide equitable access to opportunities and supports for students. Students who live in poverty face additional challenges outside of school, such as unstable housing, food insecurity, and limited access to healthcare. The impact of rural poverty is exacerbated by lack of services, lack of providers, lack of public transportation, and geographic barriers which make simple tasks such as getting to a pharmacy or grocery store challenging and sometimes impossible. Schools with adequate funding can provide or coordinate support services to help mitigate these barriers. Breaking down these barriers helps improve student attendance, decrease disruptive behaviors, and increase student achievement. What additional resources does it take for a district to meet the needs of students when more than 60% of students live in poverty compared with districts that serve students with a poverty rate of less than 10%? The percentage of students living in poverty must continue to be a significant component of the formula. Ensuring that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have access to quality education is a matter of equity and social justice. Adequate funding helps bridge the gap between wealthy and impoverished communities, promoting equal opportunities for all students.

FRPL:

Free & Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) percentages are a key component of the foundation aid formula. Specifically, the formula uses a three-year average of the FRPL percentage for grades K-6, multiplied by 0.65, to calculate funding.

In Cherry Valley-Springfield, the district reaches out to families each September to complete FRPL forms. These forms request information about household members and income. In addition, we receive data from the Direct Certification Matching Process (DCMP) which includes families receiving SNAP or Medicaid benefits. Accurate FRPL data relies on both these submitted forms and direct certification data. However, in recent years, many schools, including Cherry Valley-Springfield, have participated in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Under CEP, all students receive free breakfast and lunch, and schools are relieved from collecting household applications for FRPL. As a result, the district has noticed a significant decrease in the return rate of FRPL forms which are crucial for capturing the complete picture of eligibility beyond those directly certified. This shift has led to inaccuracies in the FRPL data used in the foundation aid formula due to the decrease in form submission rates which means

that our FRPL data may no longer fully reflect the number of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The potential impact on the foundation aid funding received by the district is real. The foundation aid formula must accurately represent the needs of CEP schools like Cherry Valley-Springfield.

English Language Learners:

English Language Learners (ELLs) bring rich diversity to classrooms and communities. However, the increase in the ELL population has brought new challenges and significant costs to districts such as Margaretville in which 30% of students are hispanic and many of those students are English Language Learners. In order to meet the demands of this increase, the district has invested in specialized staff, training for our existing teachers, and resources to support the unique needs of these students such as specialized instruction, language support services, and cultural integration programs. The funding formula needs to accurately reflect the additional resources these students need to succeed. The current formula weight for ELL students of .5 should be reexamined in order to provide adequate services for students. By ensuring that the needs of English Language Learners are properly weighted in the aid formula, districts can provide the tools necessary to overcome language barriers and achieve academic success.

Income Wealth Index:

Part of the current foundation aid formula is a calculation of the expected local contribution using the Income Wealth Index (IWI). This calculation is the ratio of a district's adjusted gross income per pupil compared to the statewide average. For example, an Income Wealth Index of 2 would mean that the district has an adjusted gross income that is twice the state average and, therefore, that district would be expected to contribute twice as much as the average school district.

This method might seem like a logical and fair method of calculating local contribution yet problematic limitations exist related to the IWI. The formula limits the maximum IWI to 2 and the minimum IWI to 0.655. These artificial floors and ceilings limit the ability to truly compare a community's ability to pay. For example, a district like Laurens has an IWI of .486 in the 2024-2025 foundation aid projections. Laurens is treated the same as a district with an IWI of 0.655. This calculation makes poorer districts look richer. Conversely, a district with an IWI of 3 is treated the same as a district with an IWI of 2 which makes the wealthiest districts seem poorer. To truly capture the community's ability to pay the expected local contribution, the floor and ceiling should be removed.

Regional Cost Index:

The regional cost index (RCI) is another key component of the foundation aid formula used to determine funding for our schools. The regional cost index is based on wages and salaries of workers in jobs requiring credentials similar to teachers. New York State is divided into nine

regions; index values range from 1.000 (North Country and Mohawk Valley) to 1.425 (New York City/Long Island). The regional cost index in the ONC BOCES region is 1.124.

A primary concern with the current model is the overwhelming size of the regions. This size disparity could create dramatically different RCIs for neighboring districts and does not recognize the unique circumstances of each district within a region. For example, Cooperstown is often faced with paying higher wages than other districts due to the cost of living; however, the current model requires us to use the same RCI as those in districts throughout the region. The regional cost index has not been updated since 2007 and the regions are too large and disparate. The RCI needs to be reexamined to better reflect the realities for schools.

Save Harmless:

Save harmless is a powerful and necessary component of the foundation aid formula for rural districts. Half of the districts in NYS are on save harmless. Of the nineteen ONC BOCES districts, 17 are on save harmless. The elimination of save harmless would result in a \$19.5 million funding reduction in our region. As an example of the impact on one of the ONC component districts, in 2023-24 Stamford's save harmless amount was \$1.9 million - close to 20% of the entire budget. Loss of save harmless for this district would result in a loss of 17 full time employees - over 20% of all the employees in the district. To offset that type of loss, the district would need to increase the tax levy by 45%.

In Jefferson, the total budget was just over \$7.7 million. The district is on save harmless and received \$2,712,114 after save harmless was maintained. Unfortunately, according to the current formula, the district would generate only \$1,088,202 in foundation aid. The difference is over \$1.6 million or 22% of the budget. When reviewing the enrollment and poverty data for Jefferson CSD from 2007 to 2023, enrollment declined by 138 students, or 48%. During that time, student poverty increased to nearly 60%. The student population is increasingly impacted by poverty and the needs of the students are increasing at a time when the district could lose a significant amount of foundation aid.

Schools like those in the ONC BOCES region have been right sizing over the past 20 years to mitigate the impact of shrinking enrollment and unpredictable funding. Districts work to provide the highest quality education for every student with fewer resources by utilizing shared services through ONC BOCES and neighboring districts with shares focused in areas such as special education programs, OT, PT, speech, classroom teachers, distance learning rooms, central business office, transportation, building and grounds, and athletics. Right sizing and sharing only go so far. The loss of save harmless will lead to a reduction in opportunities for students such as AP classes, electives, BOCES CTE programs and other experiences for students to prepare students for their next steps after graduation. Save harmless must be maintained in order to provide necessary and predictable funding for schools.

Fund Balance and Reserves:

In her charge to the Rockefeller Institute, Governor Hochul stipulated the review of district fund balance and reserves. The regulatory factors for fund balance and reserves guide the long range financial planning in districts. District leadership and governance teams are transparent with their taxpayers on budget documents, tax cap report cards and through the placement of reserve plans and external audit reports on their websites. Regulatory factors must be considered when studying and possibly modifying state aid formulas for rural schools facing enrollment declines and an eroding tax base.

- School districts are limited to a 4% cap on unassigned fund balances. This cap limits the ability to handle unforeseen financial emergencies or even, at times, opportunities. For example, a district with a \$10 million budget can only have a maximum unassigned balance of \$400,000. Such fund balance can quickly diminish due to unexpected costs, such as when a family with special needs children moves into the district or a new requirement is added. This limited amount of cash on hand can force a district to unnecessarily incur the cost of borrowing cash until other revenues like taxes are received.
- Districts may have other fund balances, in reserves or assigned to specific known future expenditures. Such expenditures must be clearly documented and justified. Reserve funds can only be used for specific purposes such as capital projects, retirement contributions, unemployment, and repair, to name a few. Reserve funds have specific rules for their creation, funding, and usage. For example, the Capital Reserve Fund requires voter approval which adds an additional layer of oversight and potential delay in using the funds. Reserve funds come with state-mandated reporting to the New York State Education Department and the Office of the State Comptroller. These reserves are audited annually.

While fund balances and reserves are critical components of a district's financial health, several regulatory, financial, operational, and political factors limit the ability of school districts to rely on them to offset fluctuations in state aid.

Property Tax Cap/CWR:

The New York State property tax cap was introduced five years after the foundation aid formula was put in place. Before the cap, if a school district had significant increases in property value, the school could leverage that change by increasing the tax levy while maintaining low increases in tax rates; offsetting the impact of an increased CWR (Combined Wealth Ratio) in their school aid formulas. The property tax cap has significantly altered the landscape of school funding and the ability of schools to raise revenue from local tax levies. In the past, school districts had a degree of flexibility related to the tax levy. When property values increased, schools could leverage this growth to raise the tax levy while keeping tax rate increases minimal. This balancing act allowed districts to offset the impact of an increased Combined Wealth Ratio (CWR) which is a crucial component in determining state aid. However, the implementation of

the property tax cap has changed this ability to manage school budgets. The cap limits the ability of school districts to increase their tax levies beyond a certain threshold regardless of significant property value increases. While this cap aims to provide taxpayers with predictability and control over rising property taxes, the cap inadvertently restricts the financial flexibility of school districts. This restriction means that even if property values rise significantly, districts cannot correspondingly increase their tax levy to maintain or improve services without potentially exceeding the cap. Consequently, they face a double-edged sword: higher property values raise their CWR which reduces state aid while the cap limits their ability to compensate for this loss through local taxes. The result is a tighter financial squeeze on many districts. This situation creates an uneven playing field where districts with slower property value growth or higher poverty rates may fare better in state aid calculations than those experiencing rapid property value increases but are constrained by the cap.

Equity and Access:

Rural communities face issues of equity and access. At the most basic level, the infrastructure to support consistent broadband internet access is still not a norm across the ONC BOCES region. In fact, reliable cell service is not a guarantee throughout the region. Beyond infrastructure issues, rural students face unique challenges that often limit their access to the same opportunities available to students in suburban and urban schools such as advanced coursework and extracurricular activities. Students in rural communities - in spite of strong, supportive communities and outstanding teachers and leaders - graduate with a transcript deficit. Providing a rigorous and competitive course of study that goes beyond minimum requirements and that meets the needs of all students is particularly challenging in a small district with limited resources and an ever declining enrollment.

The foundation aid conversation connects with the on-going conversation related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. In the ONC BOCES region, DEI is focused on providing equitable access to all students. Districts in the region fight a daily battle to overcome 'transcript poverty' of our students. Despite diligent efforts, rural schools simply cannot match the diverse programs and academic opportunities of suburban and urban school districts. This capacity challenge leaves academic transcripts quite different from those of suburban and urban learners. Providing equitable, predictable school funding can address the capacity and transcript disparity. The lack of predictability of funding contributes to the inequity faced by rural districts to provide opportunities for all students. The students who learn in the ONC BOCES region are no less deserving of a robust educational experience just because of their geographic location. Future funding needs to ensure that whether a district serves 300 or 3000 students, a one size fits all outcome cannot be the end result. Future funding must have flexibility and security to meet the diversity of needs of each district so that every student in New York receives an equitable education regardless of their demographics and geographics.

Conclusion:

When the foundation aid formula was first implemented, the work was celebrated because the formula seemed to offer a fair, equitable, and predictable funding model for schools. Since that time, schools have been impacted by economic downturns, inequitable funding schedules, changes to education requirements, the impact of a property tax cap and the increasing push to make schools community centers with responsibilities for safety, nutrition, mental health resources and more. In addition, districts have faced increasing financial demands in response to heightened expectations for programs and services to meet the needs of our learners. Within this unpredictable funding environment, schools are focused on issues of regionalization, collaborative services and opportunities, workforce development, college and career connections, alignment with the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission, and the implementation of the Science of Reading in order to meet the needs of the students who learn in the region. Schools engage in this work as demands increase and capacity to provide basic services decreases. Students in the ONC BOCES region deserve the same opportunities as those students who learn in suburban and urban areas. Without the additional support of foundation aid, the achievement and opportunity gap will widen. Maintaining an appropriate amount of foundation aid is not just an investment in our schools, it is an investment in our community's future. A fully funded, responsive, equitable foundation aid formula ensures that every child, regardless of their zip codes, has access to quality education and the opportunity to succeed. Creating a more equitable, predictable funding model will protect our rural schools and provide the bright futures our students deserve. The foundation aid received by schools in the ONC BOCES region is not a luxury; it is a necessity.