



SARAHANA SHRESTHA
Assemblymember 103rd District

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September 5, 2024

BRIAN BACKSTROM
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES
ROCKEFELLER INSTITUTE OF GOVERNMENT
411 STATE STREET
ALBANY, NY 12203

Re: Modernize and Expand Foundation Aid

Dear Director Backstrom,

Thank you for allowing me to submit a comment on the Foundation Aid study that is being conducted by the Rockefeller Institute. I represent the 103rd State Assembly District where four school districts faced double-digit cuts, as high as 38.7%, when the Governor proposed significant changes less than a year after fully funding the formula.

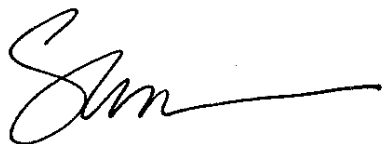
As a State legislator, I believe that it is the State's responsibility to ensure a strong social foundation without which we cannot achieve public safety—and along with stable housing, access to food, water, and healthcare, education is a critical piece of such a foundation. Public schools are not only the place where we shape our society's future caretakers, they're also the place where teachers and staff perform challenging and high-commitment work day-in, day-out, and often the only place where working parents can hope to reliably leave their children in safe hands. While changes are needed to modernize Foundation Aid, the ultimate consideration the Rockefeller's study must make is that as a cornerstone of our public well-being, our schools deserve more than the bare minimum: they deserve adequate and equitable funding that allow them to operate at their highest ability.

To modernize the formula, we must start with no longer relying on Census poverty data from 2000. For one, the COVID-19 pandemic was a major disruption to our society, altering many social and economic conditions, and re-shaping many of our localities. In a post-pandemic world, students need meaningful access to the guidance counselors, psychologists, and social workers that are critical to an adequate education.

However, modernization cannot become an excuse to end provisions like “hold harmless” that affect schools with declining enrollments—another outcome of a post-pandemic shift. In my Assembly District, the cost of living, especially housing, have driven young families out from specific areas that are seeing a decline in enrollment, whereas other areas are having a difficult time attracting such families. There should be no cuts whatsoever that lead to fewer essential Arts and Music classes, among other things. It is also short-sighted to provide decreased funding that forces struggling school districts to abandon school infrastructure that we may need again in just a few years, when it will be prohibitively expensive to bring back online.

Another outcome of the pandemic is that soaring property values in the Hudson Valley mean many of my senior constituents can no longer afford property taxes—29.3% among homeowners are reported to be housing-cost burdened, meaning they pay more than 30% of their income on housing costs. Given that New York’s GDP in 2023 was over \$2 trillion, and the size of its economy is the 10th largest in the world, bigger than that of Canada, Russia, and South Korea, we have enough wealth in the State to increase the state’s share in funding education.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Shrestha', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Sarahana Shrestha