

# Johnson City Central School District

666 Reynolds Road  
Johnson City, NY 13790  
www.jcschools.com



Dear Rockefeller Institute

I am Eric Race, Superintendent for the Johnson City Central School District located in Johnson City, NY here in Broome County. I have been in education for 26 plus years now as an educator, coach, building administrator, Athletic Director, Assistant Superintendent, where I held the fiduciary responsibilities of the school district, and now Superintendent in my fourth year.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on foundation aid and share some of my insights as to key factors that must be considered as we look to propose changes in how the formula provides critical resources to schools across our state.

Public education is the cornerstone of our democracy and remains our best path to advancing equal opportunity at a time of deepening inequality. Public schools serve children of all abilities, cultures, and backgrounds, and turn away no one. Adequately and equitably funding our public schools to meet the diverse needs of students is not just important; it is essential to ensuring their success and our shared prosperity. Public education is our most important asset and should be prioritized as our most important investment.

Foundation Aid needs updating to reflect the real cost of educating students today. To ensure every public school has the resources it needs to support all students. Underfunding schools is not an option. The state's fiscal circumstances should not form the basis for calculating the true cost of educating a child.

Schools have always been expected to provide outstanding academic programs and opportunities. We were driven by accountability and standards to provide our students with highly competent instructors and to produce academic results in learning and achievement scores. Schools today are still expected to provide outstanding programs, opportunities, and academic excellence. However, today we are also expected to provide many of the "community services" once delivered by our municipality partners, as well as, additional support and programming for each of our students and their families, including meals throughout the year, transportation, mental and physical support services, childcare, UPK, dental and health services, a community schools model, extracurricular, co-curricular and athletic programming, along with interventions and enrichment opportunities to all students throughout the calendar year, including the days and months over the traditional summer break.

The public's new expectations of schools far exceed previous models and perceptions. The new expectation of what public schools should provide all children is higher than ever, yet public support for schools is at an all-time low. This in of itself is problematic.

Revenue structures for public schools have not changed in decades and need an overhaul to provide adequate, consistent and predictable revenues if we are to continue to provide the services and programs at a level which are now expected.

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The taxpayer should not bear the brunt of funding all of these programs and services in wealthy communities, and the state should not bear the financial responsibility for funding in higher needs districts. We must find additional revenue streams if we want to transform our schools into the educational organizations our communities have come to expect. It seems there could be a better way than the property tax system that has not changed in NYS.

True enrollment by itself should not be the basis for decreasing school revenues. The cost to educate a student today is vastly different than it was 15 or twenty years ago. Certain schools are not facing enrollment declines, yet aren't seeing increases in their enrollment numbers either. The cost to "educate" the 2200 students in my district has risen exponentially due to the programs and services we are now expected to provide. This does not take into account inflation, operational cost increases, salary increases, the cost to provide health care plans, and dental insurance, and the additional costs of doing business here in NY with our vendors, contractors, and partners.

Our student demographic has changed tremendously over the past 15 years and even more drastically if we go back and compare it to 25 years ago. For example, our English Language Learner population has increased 34% in the last two school years. This has forced us to expand our programming by adding two additional teachers, multiple support staff, and three classrooms across our K-8 grade levels. School systems aren't built to sustain the rapid changes we have experienced to keep up with our changing community. Change in school takes time, too much time in fact and our schools, students, staff and communities are lagging behind due to the lack of responsiveness in the existing funding formula.

Other factors include homeless and transient rates as high as 28% in my district. This leaves us susceptible to academic and systemic barriers, disruptions to learning, and oftentimes dropouts. Having funding to address these factors directly is needed. Additionally, when the system holds high transient, high homeless, and high needs to the same accountability system, our school district, like many others, is at a huge disadvantage. It seems an inequitable way to "evaluate" schools and does not highlight the miraculous work being done inside our hallways with our students. In a world of equity and inclusion, it's misleading, and unfair and should be done away with immediately.

Schools are some of the largest employers in our areas, have some of the highest payrolls and benefit expenses, and maintain some of the largest and most complex facilities and campuses in our counties. Our taxpayers expect them to be well-kept and maintained, updated, clean, and safe learning environments for all students. They also expect to be able to use them, this is a balancing act all schools face as there are costs associated with allowing our facilities to be used by our communities in a safe manner. This is another example of community expectations and expenses not accounted for in our funding.

Another is safety and security. Amidst all the school tragedies, our number one priority is to keep our schools safe. The mechanisms, devices, hardening, staffing, and infrastructure necessary both inside and outside our buildings are extremely expensive, yet critical. These expenses aren't allocated to schools as part of the funding and need to be included moving forward.

If provided an opportunity to identify the top priorities for revamping foundation aid, two things stand out. The first is we need predictability and sustainability of funding, secondly, is relevant and continuously updated data to generate proper funding.

Budgeting on "projections" isn't a sound way of doing business, especially when upwards of 68%

of our total spending is on people. We need to know certain revenues as we build our budgets annually. When we ask our community taxpayers to vote in May and are still guesstimating revenues and using projections, is not a sound business model to emulate.

The needs of our communities, families, and students should be integrated into the formula and included in our revenues. I am not talking about high-cost students here, but rather the increasing needs of both students and families that schools have been tasked to address. Mental and physical health, social and emotional learning, feeding, clothing, transporting, absenteeism and neglect, service providing community agency partnerships, are all now standard programs and services in which we are investing to provide the necessary support for our students and families.

Another perfect example of this is our exploding ENL student population, along with our students with disabilities. Both are highly volatile in terms of costs and expenses. We budget a certain number in April based on our current needs, by November those numbers triple and then triple again by March. We are not adequately set up from a revenue standpoint to appropriately address those changes within a budget year.

One last point I would like to emphasize is the changes we are all facing with the Blue Ribbon Commission. Multiple pathways mean expanding programming and expanding programming can mean having to expand staff and facilities. I would encourage the state to incorporate dynamic ways for providing schools the means to transition to meet the needs of the new expectations without having to cut in other areas to meet those needs. Without this funding, we could see additional inequities from school to school as some may have the means of providing for these expansions, and some may not. My school district has not lost enrollment numbers, but yet we have had to add dozens of support personnel, ENL classrooms, UPK classrooms, as well as community service programs and this takes resources. Resources in terms of space, people, and time. Resources that currently aren't directly appropriated in revenues to schools.

I am confident that the Rockefeller Institute, the State Education Department, and our NY lawmakers will address the current formula to create a more equitable and up-to-date funding mechanism that takes into account what public schools in 2025 and beyond are now expected to provide their students, families, and communities.

Thank you for allowing us to submit our testimony for consideration.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Eric R. Race". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "E" and "R".

Eric R. Race  
Superintendent of Schools

