



5 September, 2024

Dear Rockefeller Institute Researchers:

I am writing on behalf of the Candor Faculty Association, representing educators of Candor Central School District in Tioga County, to provide our input on the current study of New York State's foundation aid formula for school districts. It is our sincere hope that your findings and recommendations will lead to a more equitable and sustainable formula for funding public education in New York State.

My colleague, Mr. Brent Suddaby, Superintendent for Candor CSD has also prepared a written comment on behalf of the district. My comments here are meant to complement those.

Candor is a smaller rural high needs school district, with a significantly lower than average ability to raise local funds, combined with higher student needs than districts statewide. I'm certain that Rockefeller Institute economists and specialists know exactly what that means.

While I have taught at Candor for the last 24 years, I have had the privilege to train and teach in schools around the state in my 32 year journey: the Niagara, Long Island, Lower Hudson Valley, Mohawk Valley, and the Southern Tier/Lower Finger Lakes regions. And I am fully aware that I have not even come close to experiencing the conditions in some of the most impoverished and fiscally challenged communities in New York.

It is astonishing to me that the level of inequity between schools in each of these regions has been allowed to stand for as long as it has and in spite of the success of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity campaign in the courts and the work of the state legislature to meet those challenges. It is astonishing because it is simply so *visible*, even between districts here in the Southern Tier.

When I compare the facilities between the districts I live in and near (Maine-Endwell, Vestal, Johnson City, Union Endicott) with the one I work at and others nearby (Candor, Spencer-Van Etten, Newfield, Groton), the difference is obvious. Classroom space, science facilities, athletic facilities, computing and network systems, the availability of professionally prepared educators,

time to teach, tutor and assist, elective courses, etc. - these are things that districts like Candor simply cannot provide at the same level that other districts can.

And then when I consider the facilities and profiles of some schools on Long Island and in the Hudson Valley, where I was raised and started teaching, the only word that matters is ***injustice***

My colleague Mr. Suddaby and I, as well as our predecessors, and Candor Boards of Education over the decades have been repeatedly stymied by paltry increases in state aid, primarily foundation aid. We are continually forced to make unfair, and ***unjust***, trade-offs between all of the factors that allow us to provide the best education we can to the children in this community.

This is hardly news to anyone studying this issue with any seriousness, and I need not spell it out with examples and stories of what those choices actually are.

In our district, as in many rural districts, state aid accounts for about $2/3^{\text{rds}}$ of our revenue. The Rockefeller Institute, more than any other organization, understands that this means state aid essentially dictates our budget. The extent to which we can raise funds through local means - property taxes - is a phantom, only notionally a revenue source and one that affects us primarily at the margins.

As Mr. Suddaby points out, state aid increases centered around 3% per year have simply failed to keep up with inflationary pressures that frankly overwhelm schools like ours, even when the effective headline measures of inflation rates are low; we can literally barely keep up. We are under constant threat of closing programs, not hiring staff or educators we need, continuously adding tasks to everyone's workday to the point where we all recognize it is actually more than we ***can*** do, but nevertheless ***must*** do. Students and their families should not live under constant threat of losing anything that is as vital to their success as a sound education. Districts like Candor are under the ever-present risk of not being able to provide that sound education, let alone an education that parallels one a child might get at a district like Carle Place, Manhasset, Fayetteville-Manlius and so on. It is only because of the careful stewardship of our budget, and the strength to actually make those difficult and unjust trade-offs at every level and by every person in our operation that we can do as well as we do.

Districts like Candor need a formula for foundation aid that results in a general immediate increase of about 5-10%, followed by annual increases that are within the 6-8% range. It is this level of increase that provides the stable fiscal environment that will allow us to escape making fundamental trade-offs that ultimately prevent us from providing our absolute best to the children of this community.

It is not my goal to rhetorically pit districts against one another, yet it is abundantly clear that there are communities in this state that can easily afford to provide an excellent education to their children without a single dollar of state aid; that there are communities in this state who use aid to subsidize taxes on high-value properties and very high incomes instead of funding the necessary costs of educating the children in their district. There are communities in this state that simply do not need even the modest levels of state aid that are provided to them, and that every *unnecessary* dollar that goes to one of these communities, is an absolutely *necessary dollar lost* to a school like Candor.

I fully recognize that New York's education funding through property tax and state aid revenues is about as complex a system as exists in any state. But if the objective of this study is to provide the hard truths to our state's political and professional leaders, then the fact of this complexity must be set aside for the larger and more ambitious truth that education funding by the state is simply unjust. The system that exists *already* pits communities against each other through a system so complex that it becomes impossible to make the real political choices necessary to make school funding more just.

The system must be recalibrated in a way that puts students' actual educational needs first, that more accurately and more justly accounts for local capacity and wealth, and that seeks to *eliminate* - not just minimize or take into some account - the visible economic privileges afforded to some students at the expense of ours and others throughout New York.

Regards,

Neil Farley, President
Candor Faculty Association