



Testimony of the Washington Saratoga Warren Hamilton Essex (WSWHE) BOCES and its 31 Component School Districts

Senate Standing Committee on Education:

Public Hearing to Examine the Distribution of the Foundation Aid Formula

Submitted by James P. Dexter, District Superintendent

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Andrew Cook, Superintendent of the Hartford Central School

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Good morning Chairperson Mayer and other members of the Senate. We are Dr. Douglas Huntley, Superintendent of the Queensbury Union Free School District and Andrew Cook, Superintendent of the Hartford Central School, and we providing testimony on behalf of our thirty-one (31) school district Superintendents in the WSWHE Supervisory District and our District Superintendent, Mr. James Dexter. We are providing comments today regarding the current Foundation Aid formula, how it impacts the 31 component districts that comprise the WSWHE BOCES, the staff who work at our schools, as well the approximately 38,000 students who attend our schools and ideas for ways in which it can be modified to better address the needs of our students.

Before beginning, we would like to extend to you and all Members of the Legislature - (Senate and Assembly) our very sincere thanks for all you have done, and continue to do, to support our districts and our students. Senator Mayer-we would especially like to thank you for taking the time to visit our region and meet with several of our Superintendents along with Senator Little when you first became Chair of the Senate Education Committee. As you saw and heard, our districts, like many from around the State, are serving students who are increasingly facing challenges that make learning difficult. The number of students living in poverty, those who are homeless and/or who have special needs continues to increase each year in nearly all of our districts. As a result, it is essential, for the sake of our students, that we receive adequate state aid. We thank you for your on-going advocacy that has helped increase the amount of funding for schools, including ours.

Background:

As a point of background, the WSWHE BOCES serves 31 school districts in a five-county region. There are three city school districts, three union-free school districts, one common school district and 24 central school districts. The total enrollment in the 31 component districts in Pre-K through grade 12 is approximately 38,000 students.

This is a critical time for all of the 31 school districts that comprise the WSWHE BOCES as we again attempt to ensure that our students are provided all the programs and opportunities they require to meet the needs of a 21st century economy. At the same time, the 31 districts face constraints that are related, in part, to our districts' inability to generate local revenue because of the tax cap, the significant and growing needs of our students, and increasing costs from escalating health and pension costs, among other factors. Increasingly our districts have been targeting additional resources towards staff and programs that address those challenges that many students face and which make learning difficult, including but not limited to mental health/behavioral health services.



We cannot underscore enough the significant needs of our students and the resources that districts require in order to address these needs. To illustrate:

- Sixty-one percent (61%) of our districts have 1000 or less students, with the majority of these districts having less than 700 students.
- Our districts are located in communities that are very constrained by the amount of revenue that can be generated locally due to the tax cap.
- Although most of the districts are considered of “average” wealth because they have a Combined Wealth Ratio (CWR) of 1.0, many have a high percentage of students with special needs: they are poor, in foster care, and/or are homeless.
- Many of our districts have more than 50% of their students that qualify for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program (FRLP), with some significantly higher.
- We also have several districts that appear wealthier because they have a high CWR, due to the presence of expensive lakefront property located within their district boundaries despite the number of residences that are of low income. Because the formula gives equal weight to both income and property wealth, these districts appear wealthier than they are and as a result, they receive less aid.
- Over the past several years, our districts received only a relatively small amount of Foundation Aid. These factors, combined with the inability of districts to generate revenue locally based on the tax cap, has continued to impose significant financial constraints on our districts.

It is for these and other reasons, we ask the Legislature to implement the following recommendations with regard to the Foundation Aid Formula:

1) Aid to Education:

It is important to note that the only way it is likely there will be meaningful positive changes with regard to Foundation Aid is if the amount proposed in the 2020-21 budget is significantly increased. As you know, over the past two years, the amount of the increase in Foundation Aid was \$618 million. While we are extremely grateful to the Legislature for increasing the amount above that which was included in the Governor’s proposed 2019-20 budget, this amount is not adequate funding to support our schools and more importantly our students.

2) Fund and Adjust the Foundation Aid Formula:

The Foundation Aid formula was put in place over a decade ago as part of an effort to provide for a transparent, equitable, and reliable funding stream for school districts. While it is essential that the Foundation Aid formula continue, it is important to note that several key factors have changed—specifically the enactment of local tax cap. With the implementation of the tax cap, it is critical that the Foundation Aid formula be adequately funded and modified in the following manner:

Recommendation:

- **Review, Update and Increase the Foundation Aid Amount that currently is \$6,714 per pupil.** Because the Foundation Aid amount is the basis upon which the Foundation Aid formula is built, it is imperative that it accurately reflects the true cost of educating a student. While this amount generally gets increased annually, the increases reflect a modest increase to an outdated base amount. To this end,



it is essential that efforts we taken to determine the true cost to educate a student and establish this as the new base for the Foundation Aid Amount.

- **Establish a Better Method for Determining Student Need.** A key variable in the Foundation Aid formula pertains to student need. The major metric in this determination is a district's measure of how many students qualify for the Free and Reduced Lunch program (FRPL). Since the great recession, area school districts have seen a notable increase in the number of students who qualify for the Free and Reduced Lunch Program for School Lunch (the FRLP count) each year. However, questions have now arisen about the extent to which FRLP is the best & most accurate indicator of student need. Due to the stigma that can be associated with FRLP, some students, although eligible, do not take advantage of the free lunch program. In other districts, due to the large number of eligible students, districts provide all students a free lunch and therefore do not submit FRLP documentation to the State. These and other factors can significantly underestimate a districts FRLP rate and therefore student need, which in turn can reduce the amount of foundation aid a district receives. To this end, a better measure of student need must be implemented to more accurately reflect student need. This could include, but not be limited to the following approaches:
 - adjust the weighting factor for FRLP from .65 to .75-.80;
 - move to a system of direct certification
 - include other factors such as the percentage of students on HEAP, SNAP or other measures of need.
- **Maintain the "SAVE Harmless" provision.** While many districts have lost enrollment, the decrease is generally not sufficient to reduce staffing. This is the case for many of our districts. Even when enrollments decrease, districts are still required to provide students with classes and programs they are entitled and deserve to receive. To this end, it is imperative that the Foundation Aid formula continue to maintain the "Save Harmless" provision. If not, many students in our districts will be adversely impacted.
- **Provide a minimum increase of 2% in Foundation Aid to all school districts.** As indicated, many of our districts (mostly average need), do not receive significant Foundation Aid increases despite the growing needs of our students. Because of this, it is imperative that districts receive a minimum of a 2% increase in Foundation Aid.

We would also like to underscore another important aspect of the school aid formula (although not directly Foundation Aid) that must be increased. This includes the aidable salary for BOCES Career and Technical Education (CTE) instructors.

3) Increase the \$30,000 Threshold on BOCES Aid for Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs:

Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs provide students with essential skills that prepare them for college and careers. However, the existing state aid formula for CTE programs operated by BOCES only provides aid for the first \$30,000 of a BOCES' instructors salary,



although the average salary is now \$67,000. The current salary was established in 1992 and must be increased to ensure that students have access to CTE pathway but providing 100% aidability for the salaries of CTE salaries.

Recommendation:

- **Increase the aidable salary for CTE instructors to 100%.**

Again, we would like to extend our sincere thanks for your attention to this most important issue- Foundation Aid and its impact on students throughout the State.