

The Issue

Rural Schools are in danger of not implementing the Regents Reform Agenda. State aid has been cut over \$1 billion, and limited local fiscal capacity have led to the erosion of educational services. The enacted property tax cap, \$600 million of Federal EdJobs funds scheduled to expire, and weak state revenue projections virtually ensure this erosion will accelerate, compromising the capacity to offer (particularly at the secondary level) the educational programming required by statute and regulation to comprise a “sound basic education”, let alone the educational improvements the Regents reform agenda is designed to inspire. As a result, many schools will become “educationally insolvent” whether or not their balance sheets are financially insolvent. Such educational insolvency will require the Regents to either dissolve the institution or ensure fiscal adequacy.

The local school is the “town square” that binds rural communities and provides significant economic support for the town and the community. Fear that losing the school results in the loss of the community translates to reluctance to merge in the traditional sense.

Absent significant structural change, schools await a slow demise. Cohorts of students with progressively inferior educational opportunities will be casualties until insolvency brings the problem to a head. Yet, mergers have the capacity to weaken rural communities’ economic viability and the current structure of the laws guiding mergers have resulted in an 80% failure rate. Another option is needed.

The Solution

District Superintendents are recommending that BOCES have the independent capacity to offer grade 7-12 instruction. This initiative will allow communities to maintain their schools, focusing on elementary instruction. They can choose to tuition their students to a BOCES run comprehensive high school. The goal is to create economies of scale to offer more educational opportunities for students to support the Regents reform agenda.

Specific Proposals

The Board of Regents should consider the following in its Legislative/State Aid Proposal:

1. Provide BOCES with the statutory/regulatory authority to confer high school diplomas.
2. Provide BOCES with the statutory/regulatory authority to operate a comprehensive high school.
3. Provide School Districts with the ability to tuition their secondary students out starting in the 7th grade to attend a regional comprehensive high school.
4. Reprogram existing merger aid to provide resources to facilitate the initial conversion of school buildings and programs.
5. Allow this to be an opportunity for the creation of regional or county wide secondary school experiences that will break from the traditional culture associated with secondary teaching.
6. Allow for the fulfillment of the College and Career Agenda the Board of Regents has instituted.