



## **REFORM WITHOUT REPRESENTATION**

The following letter has been sent to Interim Education Commissioner Tahoe and Deputy Secretary for Education Fuller.

*Dear Deputy Secretary Fuller and Commissioner Tahoe,*

*To say that the rural educational community is distressed over the lack of representation of rural schools in your planning task force composition is a dramatic understatement. My office has never been so inundated with concerns expressed by so many local school leaders. I certainly understand their outrage.*

*Our rural schools were experiencing severe challenges prior to this crisis. Lack of broadband internet access, lack of funding (leading to an all too narrow curriculum) transportation issues, increased poverty and outward migration all posed seemingly insurmountable problems to successful instruction. Now, having turned their delivery system around on a dime and added new responsibilities, our rural educational community is being told to plan a way to reopen schools in the fall-with the potential loss of up to 20% of their state aid. Needless to say, a 20% cut in funding to a school receiving minimal state aid is nothing compared to rural schools that receive the vast majority of their resources from the state.*

*Simply put, the educational brunt of this pandemic has fallen on our rural students. Nowhere else has the issue of digital learning been so stymied by the lack of reliable internet service. Nowhere else has the isolation been so severe, the meal delivery so logistically daunting or the prospect of reopening under a new design so nearly impossible. The busing situation alone seems insurmountable. Now, with no state leader in either house of the legislature or sitting as the chair of the Education Committees of either house, or as governor of our state with a rural perspective, we will forge ahead without any rural representation to suggest how plans might actually work in our 320 rural school districts. Nearly half of all of our state's school districts will be left to simply hope someone will think of them and the impact of proposed policies on rural districts.*

*This crisis has highlighted the severity of our state's inequitable approach to rural education. It has also provided the opportunity to show how innovative and inspirational rural educational leaders can be. I am at a loss to understand how their perspective is not vitally important to any redesign of our educational delivery system and the plan to reopen school buildings. The leadership shown by both the governor and our State Education Department has been stellar throughout this crisis; until this dramatic misstep.*

*I urgently request that you inform rural educational leaders of how their perspective will be given consideration in the work of your educational planning groups.*

*Thank you for your kind assistance in this critically important matter.*

*Very truly yours,*

*David A. Little,, Esq.  
Executive Director  
Rural Schools Assn. of New York State  
Communities Committed to Educational Excellence*

RSA received an immediate response from the governor's office, assuring RSA that the administration is "interested in the views of rural schools" and requesting the names of people "who can speak on behalf of rural schools." If you would like to inform the panel on the rural school perspective, please email RSA Executive Director Dave Little at [dal295@cornell.edu](mailto:dal295@cornell.edu).

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### **Free On-Line Learning Webinar Series**

Whether you're just trying to get through the rest of the school year or planning for instruction next fall, digital learning will play an important role. Good virtual instruction will be vital to rural student achievement and even has the potential to supplement our "in person" curriculum. Your RSA is pleased to partner with K12 to bring you timely and relevant information in an easy format. Just take a look at the list of free webinars we're offering below. Forward the list to your administrative team and instructional staff and have them register to participate in as many of the webinars as they (or you!) choose. The quality of your digital instruction will improve, you'll feel more confident about the fall and you won't have invested a dime to do it!

[Take a look...](#)



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### **Re-imagining Education**

The governor recently has decided to "reimagine education" using the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that is most widely known for controversial ideas like the Common Core Learning Standards, using student tests to evaluate teachers and student data warehousing. Though rural school districts are likely to be the most heavily affected by state aid cuts to education and despite the fact that rural schools were the most educationally hard hit by the pandemic, no rural representation will sit on the governor's task force. Nonetheless, the crisis has highlighted many longstanding issues facing rural schools, including lack of broadband access, lack of funding to

pay for devices for students, transportation challenges and more. The Oneonta Daily Star story below highlights these issues. RSA is quoted extensively.

## **CUOMO URGES SCHOOLS TO SHIFT ONLINE PERMANENTLY**

By Joe Mahoney CNHI State Reporter  
May 6, 2020 Updated May 9, 2020



ALBANY — Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s proposal to “reimagine” the way school children are taught by increasing reliance on digital technology is getting a chilly reception from some educators.

Cuomo, a Democrat, has rankled some unionized teachers and others by saying that in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic the state plans to work with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to incorporate more distance learning in New York schools.

His suggestion comes amid what is both a public health crisis and an accompanying financial crisis that is expected to result in deep cuts to the budgets of New York’s 700 school districts. The state is facing a \$13 billion deficit and Cuomo has signaled he will have to make cuts to schools and other services unless the federal government provides states with a massive injection of aid.

Speaking Tuesday in New York City, the governor suggested the traditional method of teaching has become antiquated in an era when communication is conducted across digital platforms,

“The old model of, everybody goes and sits in a classroom, and the teacher is in front of that classroom, and teaches that class, and you do that all across the city, all across the state, all these buildings, all these physical classrooms, why? With all the technology you have,” Cuomo said.

Niagara Falls City Schools Superintendent Mark Laurrie said while high school students have demonstrated they can adapt to online classes, elementary school children have a more difficult time with the experience.

“We certainly think we have to reimagine things, and I understand the leverage point this crisis has put us in,” Laurrie said. “However, it is really important to get input from people in the field — people who know families and who know kids, and who know learning styles and know what works and what doesn’t.”

Though there is merit to the contention that schools will need to bring on more distance learning, it would have been more prudent to initially focus on plugging the gaps that exist in access to broadband technology in some upstate regions, said David Little, director of the Rural Schools Association of New York State.

“Nothing highlights this need more than this situation,” said Little, pointing out that public health concerns underscore the need to prepare for more disasters that could require social distancing.

The crisis, he noted, has highlighted the disparities in how education resources are distributed and how “we (in rural districts) rely so heavily on local funding from communities that didn’t have it before and sure as heck aren’t going to have it now, for a while at least.

“We have to get those areas up to speed and have some degree of equity in distributing our resources so they are capable of handling this type of situation,” Little added.

Rural communities outside Oneonta, Niagara Falls and Plattsburgh are among those where residents are acutely aware of New York’s digital divide, with access to cutting edge high-speed digital broadband is not always available as it is to residents of urban areas.

Assemblyman D. Billy Jones, D-Plattsburgh, said the lack of broadband access is just one concern he expects to hear from residents of his district, but he also suggested many people will not want to abandon the traditional approach of teachers being in classrooms with their students.

“I’m a public school guy,” said Jones, noting he was not surprised Cuomo is getting pushback from opponents of privately-run charter schools that have been funded by the Gates Foundation.

Jones noted his 6-year-old daughter, a first-grader enrolled in public school, has missed being with her classmates during the current shutdown of school buildings.

“For a student to be well-rounded, you need that social aspect you get from in-person teaching,” the lawmaker said.

Cuomo called Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, “a visionary.” He also suggested the pandemic produces an opportunity to challenge the “status quo” when it comes to traditional classroom learning.

But his effort to sell the concept got an unfavorable review from the politically influential New York State United Teachers union.

“If we want to reimagine education, let’s start with addressing the need for social workers, mental health counselors, school nurses, enriching arts courses, advanced courses and smaller class sizes in school districts across the state,” said Andy Pallotta, NYSUT’s president. “Let’s secure the federal funding and new state revenues through taxes on the ultra-wealthy that can go toward addressing these needs.”

New York reported an additional 232 deaths from the virus Wednesday, bringing the overall fatality toll to 20,597.

Joe Mahoney covers the New York Statehouse for CNHI’s newspapers and websites. Reach him at [jmahoney@cnhi.com](mailto:jmahoney@cnhi.com)

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### **SEND US YOUR VIDEOS!**

We can make you a star! The Capital Region’s ABC News 10 is looking for cellphone video clips of up to 45 seconds showing school staff showing or explaining what it’s like to close school for the year without students being present. Cleaning out lockers, putting away cafeteria supplies, bus drivers showing how their role has shifted; just explain what we’re looking at and how you feel. The clips need to be no more than 45 seconds and your phone needs to be held sideways to get a horizontal view. Just remember the little people when you’re on the red carpet! <https://www.news10.com/news/local-news/teacher-appreciation-week-2-months-into-educating-during-the-pandemic/>

