



## READY. **FIRE!** AIM.

There's nothing new about schools being in a "fluid" situation. We've had years where we didn't know state aid prior to the budget votes. We can handle that. We've had years where state appointed task forces have opined on where public education should head. (They haven't often been lasting or productive, but of course, this time around could be the exception to the rule.) What we have never had is a major gubernatorial effort to change the way public education is delivered while we're in the midst of dealing with an unprecedented crisis that has changed everything about traditional instruction, the use of school buildings and staff and the potential loss of devastating levels of state support.

Sure. I get the concept of using the lessons revealed during the crisis to improve public education. The pandemic has in fact revealed much about how rural schools are shortchanged and the significant challenges they face in comparison to their counterparts in other demographics within the state. There's the lack of broadband internet access, the extra distance and increased isolation, the lack of social services and community partners. Most importantly, there's the traditional distribution of state aid that bears little to no relationship to actual community need. All of that has been front and center during the closure of school buildings.

The idea of bringing together representatives and educational experts to see what we can do better from this point forward (given that there truly is no "new normal" but rather an ever changing adjustment to heretofore unencountered circumstances) may be appropriate, but I have to admit to an overwhelming sense of "Can you hold up long enough for us to figure out what we need to be doing before you design how we should do it?" I mean, for the love of.....

1. Dr. Fauci says not to expect a vaccine for a year to two years.
2. We are only now exploring the reality that children are in fact subject to a deadly effect from the virus. Our presumption that kids were somehow only silent carriers and thus less of a concern in bringing them back together has gone by the wayside.
3. We are being simultaneously told to plan for reopening school next fall and that we are likely to see state aid cut so dramatically that we can't rationally plan for educational programming, let alone the myriad tasks needed to alter spacing, schedules, cleaning, transportation, food delivery and personal safety.
4. Many of our school staff will face a decision on whether they can return to work at all under the conditions we create. If children are carriers, can there be a realistic expectation

that dealing with dozens of students each day can be done without exposure to the virus? Can we clean every possible surface often enough? Can we keep students away from staff? Some of those staff members will be in the high risk group and legitimately fearful. They are dedicated and caring, but they also care about their own families and the impact their potential death would have on those they hold most dear.

5. We may be in for mass lay-offs, mass (early) retirements, pared down course offerings (think needing to keep all students in a single room and have teachers move between them rather than having students in the halls together...to pull that off you can't have every student have their own schedule. You'll need a common schedule.)
6. Transportation alone in rural schools will pose a seemingly overwhelming obstacle. How do you "socially distance" students on a bus and keep from bringing the last bus run to campus about the time they're used to getting the last kids home? The list goes on and on.....

In short, the Reimagine Education Task Force is being asked to build a new airplane not only while it's in the air, but while the engines are on fire and the pilots have been ordered to work from home! It's honorable and important work and we commend those called to participate. The governor's office has responded to our call for representation and is creating an advisory group to inform the task force work. Rural schools will have a number of representatives. (Thank you to those of you who volunteered for this critical, but admittedly extra work!) That said, it will be difficult to not arrive at their conclusions weeks or months before they issue them.

**Let's see if I can guess....**we need to build out our internet connectivity to ensure that all students have the ability to function well in our new educational reality. We need a combination of in person teaching, supplemented by digital learning (with the caveat that schools will need to increase contacts with students who by definition will become more isolated in their formative years.) We need equity, so that urban and rural students have the same opportunities as their wealthier suburban counterparts. We need teacher collaboration and an expanded curriculum (perhaps provided digitally) and a new structure in our rural regions (perhaps regional high schools offering a wider variety of programming to allow rural graduates to compete successfully at the next level.) And...we need to do it all a lot more cheaply because our state comes out of these recessions much more slowly than its sister states.

**Sound about right?** If so, it's because all of those things have been painfully obvious to rural school districts for years now. For instance, in 2015 BOCES DSs David O'Rourke and (then BOCES DS) Scott Bischooping chaired the governor and legislature's Online Learning Advisory Council. Their report was largely ignored, but if turned into policy would have prevented many of the issues we currently face. Hopefully the crisis forces the formerly intractable issue.

We wish the Reimagine Education Task Force all the best. My hope is that they think broadly but practically. The obstacles out there are very real. The state's efforts to bring broadband to rural New York and the work of the companies contracted to do that work has been a comedy of errors. When you raise expectations, be sure to check your circumstances to accurately gauge your chance of success. I know that it's no more reasonable to return to prior practices with so much less money than it is to expect brave new innovations without resources. I guess all I'm really saying here is that we need to recognize we're in the midst of a real struggle. The struggle will be prolonged and will get worse as we understand the virus and the restrictions it demands on what we have always done. Don't spend a lot of time and effort planning for a future that may well not exist by the time your work as a task force is done.

Plan for reopening school next fall? Sure...but first tell us whether it's realistic to reopen buildings at all. Why not wait on local health departments to weigh in? Reimagine education? Of course...but first allow us to figure out what we do today, right now or next week in an ever changing environment. How about letting us know when this school year will end before we jump into the next one? Tell us the science. Tell us the finances. Tell us the risks to life and the economy. And as a "recovering attorney", tell us whether we're immune to suit for exposing staff and children to undue risk? Don't underestimate people's anger at having the virus spread to previously virus-free areas because we put hundreds of people together in one place, then sent them home to vulnerable people.

It's been a century since the last pandemic and 90 years since the Great Depression. The last time, one followed on the heels of the other. It wasn't coincidence. Let's not repeat mistakes, let's not waste resources. When we're finally able to take stock of our lives, the answer may well be to leave our livestock alone! The governor fondly repeats that being New York tough also means being smart. Let's hope his task force heeds his advice.



## Virtual Training Opportunity

Leveraging MTSS For Strengthening Community Schools and Beyond .  
Information [Here](#)

## 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...](#)

