

The Post-Journal

School Equity For Chautauqua County Falls Short

I recently read two articles in The Post-Journal's November 13, 2016 edition entitled "*Costs of Poverty*" and "*Student Achievement Can Drive Economic Growth.*" These two articles have inspired me to write about poverty in our Chautauqua County schools. This seems to be the political season for change of the status quo in federal government. I call on our state legislators to act on the status quo change of the Foundation Aid state aid formula for our school districts. The Post-Journal article stated that city residents living in poverty increased from 23.4% to 28.9% between 2010 and 2014 and that 25.4% of all city families lived below the poverty level. The Post Journal article on student achievement stated "*..good news is research shows improvement in a K-12 education can have a dramatic effect in boosting the economy.*"

It is easy to correlate educational achievement and economic growth. Better education usually means better jobs for people and therefore more disposable income that drives the economy. The job of public education is to make more of our graduates college and career ready. But, therein lies the challenge to our county schools. You see, most school districts in Chautauqua County are below the average wealth of schools in New York State. Combined wealth ratio (a measure of property and income in New York State) for our county schools is below the average for New York State. We have many students who live in poverty and come to school at a disadvantage making it difficult for them to be successful in school. There is a correlation between poverty and student achievement. It usually means more students with disabilities, more limited English language

learners and more remediation is needed for a fairly large percentage of our student population.

The New York State Constitution education clause, Article XI, guarantees that all children of this state may be educated. A recent report from the New York State Association of School Business Officials (NYSASBO) entitled *“Supporting Our Schools”* states *“This promise is the cornerstone of our democracy whereby all of our children will have the opportunity to receive an education that prepares them to be successful following high school. The public makes this investment and receives in return the benefits of an educated work force: increased earnings, civic engagement, and decreased costs for public assistance.”*

The fact that so many students need extra remediation in various forms due to poverty backgrounds in our schools costs significant dollars. Several years ago, New York State settled a lawsuit, “Campaign for Fiscal

Equity” and created the Foundation Aid formula, with increased funding to poor schools that was supposed to help correct and drive more dollars to poor schools for these reasons. The Foundation Aid state aid formula has never been fully phased in and therefore we are unable to evaluate its effectiveness. The report further states that poverty has risen the past five years. The NYSASBO report further states, “students living in poverty experience enormous mental, physical and emotional disadvantage and trauma compared with their peers, and those significantly impact their performance in school. It is widely documented that students in poverty require additional time, resources and effort on part of all those involved in order to meet the same standards as their peers.” (ASBO report, p. 4)

School aid formulas are supposed to level the playing field for all schools’ children so that a student in Chautauqua County has the same opportunity as a student in Nassau County on Long Island. Plainly stated, this does not occur in our great state of New York. Last year, the New York State Legislature eliminated the GAP Elimination Adjustment budget cut formula that affected state aid to schools for seven years. This GEA formula took valuable state aid away from our school districts that was

called for by the Foundation Aid formula. These monies will probably never be received in the future.

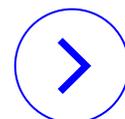
The Chautauqua County School Boards Association (CCSBA) calls on our state legislators to alter the Foundation Aid formula this year to emphasize the poverty factors within the formula and to work on distribution of state aid to the needy, poor school districts like those in Chautauqua County. This is proven by data generated by the Statewide School Finance Consortium (SSFC) that states (based on a 3 year average of free and reduced lunch counts) the poorest public schools receive 3.61 times the state aid the richest districts receive. But, those districts with most poverty are actually 16.25 times more impoverished than those with the least poverty. This is a big gap to close.

While there are many more statistics that could be quoted, the facts are that our upstate legislators need to help our Chautauqua County school districts by fixing the poverty factors within the Foundation Aid formula and change the distribution agreement that each section of the state receives a certain percent of the state aid commonly called The Shares Agreement. The Foundation Aid needs to distribute the dollars to the poor school districts, not the affluent schools. Equity is a paramount factor in democracy. Our children deserve the same opportunities as the more affluent children. When one end of the state spends in excess of \$50,000 per student and poor schools spend less than \$20,000 per student there is something wrong with the poverty factors and distribution of state aid. The total state aid spent does not need to be increased significantly, but it surely needs to be distributed differently to meet the New York State Constitution theme of a sound basic education.

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