



A PROJECT OF



Alliance for Quality Education &

Campaign for Fiscal Equity Fact Finding Tour

During the week of February 24-28, the Alliance for Quality Education and the Campaign for Fiscal Equity undertook a fact finding tour in 14 school districts across New York State. In each of these districts we found that school district leadership, teachers and staff are all working hard to provide a quality education to their students. All of these districts face significant fiscal challenges and have taken steps to reduce costs. All face impending budget shortfalls which will produce additional cuts to educational programs unless the state budget provides substantially more funding than contained in the Executive Budget proposal. Despite these fiscal challenges and the cuts in staff and programs, in each district we visited personnel are going above and beyond to strive to continue to provide their students with the best possible education. Regularly staff are expending their own money to provide basic school supplies and parents and communities are fundraising to prevent some program cuts. Some districts have been able to plug some of their gaps with short term grant funds, but these funds are of limited duration and when they expire the schools will face even greater fiscal challenges. However, our conclusion is clear: across these districts there exists a pattern of systemic educational resource deficiencies that has been created and perpetuated by ongoing underfunding of schools as a result of state policies. These resource deficiencies impede the ability of the district leadership and educators in these districts to provide their students with the educational opportunities that are their constitutional right. We will be undertaking additional fact finding in the coming weeks and months in order to prepare the evidence necessary to prove that systemic constitutional violations exist as a result of New York State's ongoing failure to provide the funding necessary for all students to receive the "sound, basic education" that is their right under the New York State constitution.

We visited:

1. Hoosick Falls, rural high needs district in the Capital Region
2. Cohoes, small city high needs district in the Capital Region
3. Schenectady, small city high needs district in the Capital Region
4. Amsterdam, small city high needs district in the Mohawk Valley
5. Middletown, small city high needs district in the Hudson Valley
6. Ossining, small city average needs district in the Hudson Valley
7. Herkimer, a rural high needs district in the Mohawk Valley
8. Holland Patent, a rural average need district in the Mohawk Valley
9. Wyoming, a rural average need district in the Genesee Valley
10. Byron Bergen, a rural average need district in the Genesee Valley
11. Yonkers, one of the Big Five City School Districts
12. Copiague, a small city high need district in Suffolk County
13. Otego-Unadilla (Unatego), a rural high need district in the Mohawk Valley/Southern Tier

14. Binghamton a small city high need district in the Southern Tier

Our team:

In each location we had staff from AQE, an attorney from CFE/ELC. In some districts we also had parent representatives of AQE, and academics that work closely with us.

Key Findings:

There are substantial resource deficiencies in most of the districts we toured. We found substantial and compelling evidence of a failure by the Governor and Legislature to provide the resources necessary for all students to receive a “sound, basic education,” as guaranteed by the New York constitution.

Class sizes have consistently risen in many of these districts often exceeding 25 students and in some districts exceeding 30.

There have been significant cuts in instructional and support staff. In some districts as much as 20 percent of staff have been cut, and in several districts these cuts have occurred despite growing enrollments.

Several districts have made cuts to art and music, most have been forced to reduce library access and/or operate libraries without librarians, and some have schools with no libraries. School districts also have reduced offerings in foreign languages, physical education and elective courses. Some school districts have replaced electives with study halls, and one district reports that students must choose between band and Spanish as they can only offer one section of each and they are scheduled at the same time.

Two school districts have cut pre-K from full-day to half day.

Supports for struggling students experienced one of the most substantial reductions. A majority of the districts have substantially cut back or even eliminated summer school for most students— a key program to address summer learning loss. Several only offer summer school for high school students in need of credit recovery to stay on track for graduation. Academic Intervention Services in reading and math have been either scaled back or eliminated in several districts.

Several districts cut student support services including guidance counselors, social workers and school psychologists—despite growing social and emotional needs of their students. It is not unusual for a guidance counselor in these districts to serve between 350 and 550 students, well beyond accepted student ratio levels.

All of the districts face a budget gap for 2014-15. District officials report they are bracing for yet another round of staff and program cuts. Several report that the largest non-mandated cost savings option available is to reduce kindergarten to half-day or eliminate it altogether.

Below are resource deficiencies found across one or more school districts. They are organized in five categories: instructional resources, student supports, academic supports and interventions, enrichment, and facilities and infrastructure.

Instructional Resources

- Increased Class size between 25 to 30 or more students
- Increased Kindergarten class size to 25
- Cut staff by as much as 20%
- Outdated encyclopedias
- Science books outdated
- Reduced or eliminated elective offerings
- Increased number of study halls because they cannot provide enough electives
- Cut research skills instruction a in Elementary and Middle School
- Reduced student learning time in art and music
- Pre-K cut to half- from full-day
- No pre-K
- Insufficient funding for supplies
- Reduced or only offer only one foreign language
- Reduced or eliminated library and/or librarians
- Cut home economics (skills training)
- Reduced Physical Education
- Reduced or eliminated reading and math coaches
- No art room only art carts
- Limited number of Advanced Placement or college prep courses
- Reduced Professional Development
- Decreased instructional time

In one school district, with rapidly growing enrollment, classrooms are overcrowded. Almost every classroom we saw, and we saw many, were overcrowded, with too many chairs/tables and students. In some rooms, students had to sit at teacher's desk because there was no room. It's not feasible in most instances to increase class sizes further because the rooms cannot accommodate more children.

One school district offers only **two** Advanced Placement courses

Student supports

- Guidance counselor ratio is 1:350- 550 students
- Sharing guidance counselor with neighboring school districts
- Sharing of school psychologists, social workers and guidance counselors between schools
- No security personnel
- Reduced social worker, school guidance counselors, and school psychologists

One school district described the way they support students' social emotional and behavioral health (social workers, guidance counselors, and school psychologist) as "drive by support" because they do not have enough staff in each.

Academic Supports and Remediation

- Reduced remediation
- Reduced or eliminated Academic Intervention Services for reading and math
- Eliminated or reduced summer school – most is for credit recovery only
- GED Program Eliminated
- Eliminated summer reading program
- Higher achieving students are asked to tutor struggling students
- Eliminated after-school (For elementary school)
- Eliminated inclusion program for students with Individualized Education Programs
- Reduced or eliminated reading teachers

In one district, 200 students were not promoted to the next grade level because summer school was eliminated.

Enrichment

- Lack of course offerings for higher achieving students, only online classes
- Reduced or eliminated athletic budget and supplies
- Reduced or eliminated some sports
- Decrease number of modified sports in Middle school
- Reduced clubs and extracurriculars
- Eliminated or reduced field trips, or are only possible with fundraising
- Reduced Gifted and Talented

One district cut 84% of clubs and activities at the elementary level, 40% at the middle school level, and 58% at the high school level.

Facilities and Infrastructure

- Insufficient space, remedial work done in the hallway or in shared classrooms
- Outdated technology, insufficient to support new computer-based assessments
- Inadequate funding for building repair and maintenance
- Use of closets for offices and classrooms
- Use of boardroom as a classroom
- Converted art rooms to regular classrooms – no more art room
- Reduced or eliminated maintenance personnel
- Eliminated Central Business office
- Closed schools

- Cannot offer hot lunch, they only offer cold-packed
- Converted library into classrooms, no more library

One district cannot afford to offer hot lunches, they can only offer cold packed lunch