

Elaine Collins
North Country Supervisory Union
Testimony, 1-25-24, Joint Hearing

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about education funding. I am Elaine Collins, the superintendent of schools for the North Country Supervisory Union. This is my second year as a superintendent, my 13th as a school administrator, and my 34th as an educator in Northeast Kingdom schools. I have lived in the Northeast Kingdom my whole life.

You are grappling with very difficult and challenging concepts and ideas. I have a great deal of respect for the hard decisions that you will likely have to make moving forward and I would like to provide some context for your decision-making by telling you about our supervisory union. North Country Supervisory Union has 12 educational sites. We have about 2730 students, span approximately 520 square miles, and reach 65 miles from one end to another. Our supervisory union did not unify during Act 46, which means that each of our 12 sites is individually governed, with their own budgets and systems of support for our students. We view our supervisory union structure as a “force multiplier”: we can provide resources and supports at the SU-level that many of our smaller schools couldn’t afford on their own.

In NCSU, we approached this budgeting season with hopeful trepidation that the weights would have a positive effect on tax rates in our schools. If the intent of Act 127 was to create a more equitable distribution of the statewide educational tax for poorer, rural districts to increase the tax capacity for our schools and to ease the burden on our taxpayers, surely NCSU would benefit.

Last month before CLA rates came out, our boards were very hopeful. Tax rates were projected to be down significantly in almost all 12 districts, and in the two school districts who had exceeded the 5% and 10% caps, there were reasons that we felt were very justifiable - namely, losing small schools grant and ESSER funds, a smaller than expected increase in weighted pupils, increased costs of health insurance (16.4%) and wage increases. At that point, we had been told by members of AOE finance that CLA was remaining fairly stable, so we breathed a collective sigh of relief because we felt the law was going to do what it was intended to.

Then CLA numbers came out and the dollar yield dropped, increasing tax rates from an overall decrease to an increase of \$0.27 to nearly \$0.60 – completely negating any benefit from weighting and then some. It will be a miracle to pass budgets. This is a mess. But I would respectfully argue that this isn't a mess of the schools' making.

In the last 8 – 10 years of working in schools, we have all seen a marked and dramatic increase in the percentage of schools' budgets that go into social-emotional learning and mental health supports for our students, supports that are both necessary and expensive. More and more has been thrust onto educators and schools. We have students who show up every day with significant needs - and we meet those needs

head on, but that comes at a cost. When our area's designated agencies and other community partners have no capacity for serving our students and their families, schools are forced to do so because we can't tell children and their families that there's a wait list. We are required to educate and provide for the needs of all. In the last year, we have had 3 students who have been kicked out of residential facilities because they exceeded the capacity of the facility, but then show up at school. And we are required to provide an education. And if we don't provide for the needs of students with significant issues in our schools, no one learns.

For six years prior to becoming the NCSU superintendent, I was the principal at Newport City Elementary School, a school with approximately 320 students, 80% poverty and about 27% special education/504 students. There had been six principals in the five years prior to my coming to NCSU, and students with behavior and mental health challenges needed significant support. That first year, we had 890 restraints, seclusions, and escorts – in one school year of 175 days. No one learns in an environment like that. Six years later, after putting many supports in place, developing a behavioral program housed within the school, training for staff, during my last year, that number was below 50. It is very clearly the right work to do, but it comes at a cost – and if we don't do it, the cost is every child's education.

Schools are tasked with many things that you might consider non-academic: we feed children every meal including over weekends, provide clothing, showers, do laundry, transport to doctor's and dentist's visits, mental health clinicians at school, home to school coordinators to support complex family needs, behavioral specialists, behavioral team assistants, behavioral interventionists, neurodevelopmental teams, and guidance counselors who are doing way more than signing kids up for classes. We have full-time nursing in nearly all our buildings. And that was before COVID. Now that COVID is "over" we are still dealing with the after-effects of isolation. Our youngest children are exhibiting poor social-emotional health, very low language skills, and aggression. We are on the cusp of developing our own in-house alternative PreK - 2 program and expanding our high school's alternative program to include 7th and 8th graders.

I appreciate that there are very real financial pressures that are going to affect every taxpayer, but in my humble opinion, education has been a scapegoat for far too long. We talk about the increasing societal problems of housing insecurities, drug addiction, and the mental health crisis in our state. Consider that many who are experiencing these things have children who show up on our doorsteps every day, requiring basic needs to be met first and foremost, so that we can hope to have regulated children ready to access their education, and so that every child can learn.

I believe supporting our students with all their complex needs is beyond just a mission: it is our moral imperative. Again, I respect the job that you're doing and that it is a very difficult situation. However, I respectfully ask you to consider: what's the cost – both human and financial – if we don't do this work? Schools and educators are often blamed for spending too much without taking into consideration the current context of our work and the factors that are beyond our control. Instead of blaming, we should be

working together to advocate for housing, health care, and mental health solutions. Then and only then will our schools change back to being primarily educational institutions, instead of social services agencies. Thank you for your time and consideration.