

Paying the Highest Price

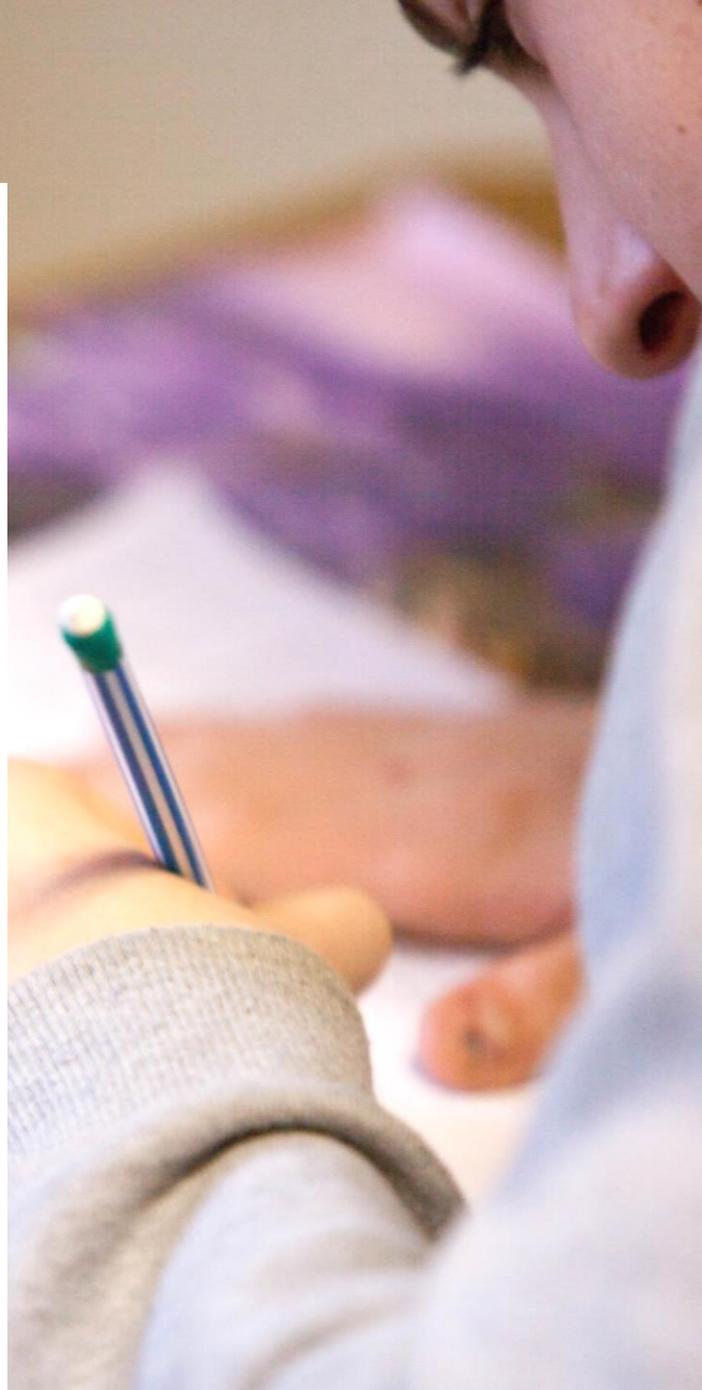
How Potential State Cuts in Education Aid Bolster Institutional Racism, Versus Better Alternatives

POLICY BRIEF

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The Children's Agenda

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Executive Summary

The Rochester City School District (RCSD) is facing unprecedented mid-year reductions in education aid from New York State. These cuts surpass the losses faced by any other school district in Monroe County, and are among the highest of any school district in New York State. The state's current approach to budget reductions disproportionately targets districts with the highest needs, undermines the purpose of New York State aid to local school districts, and bolsters institutional racism in our community.

The COVID-19 pandemic created massive tax revenue shortfalls for New York State. To manage aspects of the state's deficit while looking to the federal government for relief, the state Division of Budget has withheld 20% of scheduled aid from municipalities and school districts throughout the state. School districts with high poverty rates and low property tax bases like Rochester are disproportionately dependent on state aid. The state's decision to withhold and potentially cut 20% of aid in an across-the-board manner has led to a cascade of budget cuts and layoffs in high need school districts throughout the state, including RCSD, and has altered the re-opening plans of many districts.

The purpose of this brief is to:

- 1) Demonstrate the fundamental inequity of imposing cuts in this manner
- 2) Identify better options instead of imposing across-the-board state aid cuts
- 3) Promote a new approach to funding schools at a local level, leaving Rochester less vulnerable to future state aid shortfalls.

Findings

School funding in New York State comes from two primary sources - local property tax revenues raised by school districts, and aid from New York State to address disparities in local property tax capacity. Wealthier districts receive less aid while districts with higher poverty rates and lower property tax bases receive more support. Accordingly, any form of across-the-board state aid cuts disproportionately harms higher need districts.

Under a 20% cut scenario:

- **Monroe County would lose nearly \$262 million** in state aid, or \$2,492 per student.
- **RCSD would incur 53% of all cuts in the county, despite having only 26% of the county's students.**
- RCSD's losses would amount to a staggering **\$139 million, or \$4,424 per pupil.**
- Comparing student need between districts, RCSD has a **far higher share of Monroe County's English Language Learners (66%), Black and brown children**

(64%), students with disabilities (40%), and economically disadvantaged children (48%) as compared to all other districts.

These children will suffer the most from these disproportionate cuts.

Recommendations

Federal aid is desperately needed to address New York State's budget shortfall. However, if it does not arrive, New York has many better options for closing this year's budget deficit than cutting billions in school aid from high need districts. In the past, New York State has turned to a mix of tax increases and spending cuts to balance the state's budget, and the state should do so today. Specifically, New York State should consider approaches to raising revenue like:

- Tax increases on high income households
- Pied-à-terre tax
- Pause the implementation of a scheduled tax cut

To the extent that it must reduce education aid, the state should identify ways to make cuts more equitable. The state should consider limiting cuts to those school districts able to raise sufficient local tax revenues to support their schools.

Locally, we must come together and begin to dismantle the structures that have prevented children in Rochester, particularly Black and Hispanic students, from receiving the education that they deserve. We cannot continue to turn to state government to address the gross inequities present in Rochester and Monroe County. This process should begin by developing a new, more equitable approach to local tax revenue distribution. Our community's leaders should develop and implement a plan to distribute county sales tax revenues more equitably by ensuring that higher needs school districts in the county receive a greater share of those funds. This plan should also include a mechanism to pool property tax revenues throughout the county.

The governance of this new regional approach to revenue sharing could be done within the existing structure of county government, through a partnership of school districts, or through some other mechanism like a revived Monroe County Council of Governments. A revenue sharing plan could also establish a framework for future efforts to equitably increase cross-district student enrollment, improve socio-economic and racial diversity throughout the county, and ultimately, build support for a move toward countywide schools.

Introduction

On April 8th, during one of his then daily COVID-19 briefings, Governor Andrew Cuomo spoke passionately about the disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 illness and death in New York's Black and Hispanic communities. He remarked,

“It always seems that the poorest people pay the highest price. Why is that? Why is that? Whatever the situation is, natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina, the people standing on those rooftops were not rich white people. Why? Why is it that the poorest people always pay the highest price? But let's figure it out. Let's do the work. Let's do the research. Let's learn from this moment and let's learn these lessons and let's do it now.”ⁱ

The Governor's insight that day, coupled with an apparent national reckoning about racism in the United States, raised hopes that New York could emerge from the COVID-19 crisis as a more racially just and equitable state.

Unfortunately, it does not appear that any lessons learned from that moment have thus far been applied to the state's budget crisis, especially as it relates to education aid. In early August, the state withheld 20% of scheduled school aid to districts across New York State, and has threatened to make those cuts permanent if the state does not receive financial relief from the federal government. The 2020-21 state budget, negotiated during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, gave the Governor extraordinary powers to impound or cut spending throughout the year. He has opted not to use that authority yet, and has instead withheld funds from municipalities, school districts, and organizations that contract with the state to provide various services, usually by withholding 20% of the expected amount.

High need school districtsⁱⁱ that serve the vast majority of low-income students and students of color are disproportionately dependent on state aid, meaning that a 20% cut is felt hardest by the students of those districts.

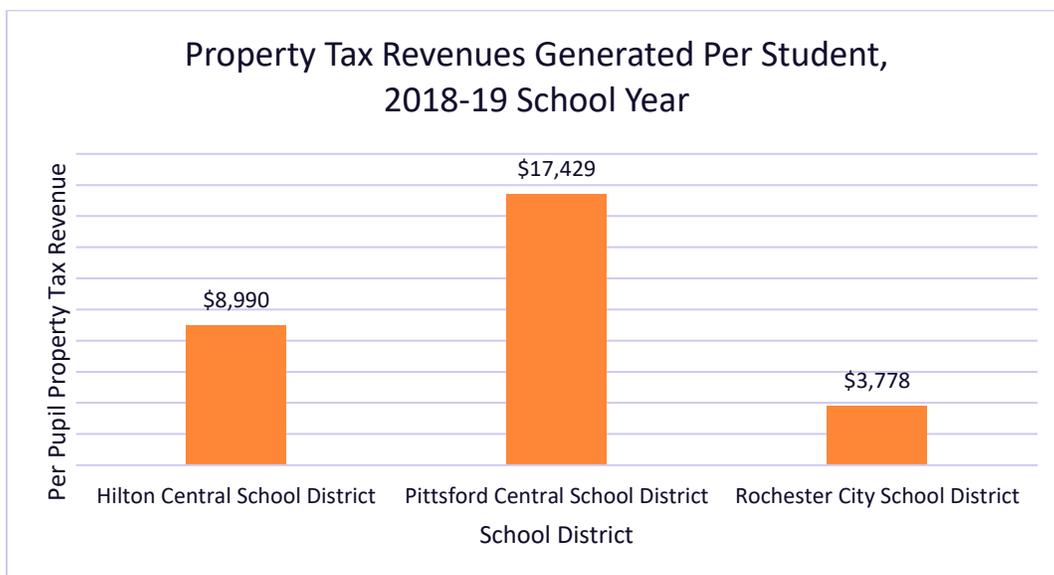
In response to the state's decision to withhold 20% of scheduled August aid, many high need school districts across the state, including the Rochester City School District, began to lay off hundreds of employees, switched to all-remote instruction to begin the year, and may run out of cash reserves before the end of the year. Thankfully, the state decided to transfer the full amount of September aid, allaying some immediate cash flow concerns in resource-constrained school districts. However, in the absence of a clear plan from the state, many districts are still implementing massive and debilitating cuts, especially if federal aid does not arrive.

Adopting any form of across the board cuts, rather than reducing aid in a more equitable manner and raising new revenues, is catastrophic to low income students and children of color throughout New York State. Rochester's children deserve better.

Basics of School Funding in New York State

The school funding model in New York State is dizzyingly complex but conceptually quite simple. School districts raise local revenues, primarily through property taxes, while the state government uses school aid to (partially) address disparities between districts and their respective abilities to fund their communities' schools. State aid is also used to target state resources to districts with higher needs like a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students or English Language Learners.

For example, take three school districts in Monroe County – Hilton Central School District, Pittsford Central School District, and the Rochester City School District. In 2018-19, these three school districts raised vastly different amounts of local revenue to support the education of children in their respective communities.ⁱⁱⁱ



This disparity is largely due to differing property values in these three communities, as property tax rates are relatively similar in all three jurisdictions. For Hilton to match Pittsford's per child revenue, that district would need to almost double property tax rates from \$22.69 per \$1,000 in assessed value to \$44 per \$1,000. A homeowner with a house worth \$150,000 would see their taxes rise by almost \$3,200 per year just to match Pittsford's level of local funding per student.

Rochester would need to increase tax rates by a staggering 460% to raise per student revenues to Pittsford's level. Under this scenario, a city homeowner with a home assessed at \$150,000 would see their property taxes increase by an astonishing \$9,890 per year to reach Pittsford's per student funding level. A Rochester resident with a home worth \$150,000 would pay \$8,921 more per year in school taxes than a Pittsford homeowner with a house of the same value.

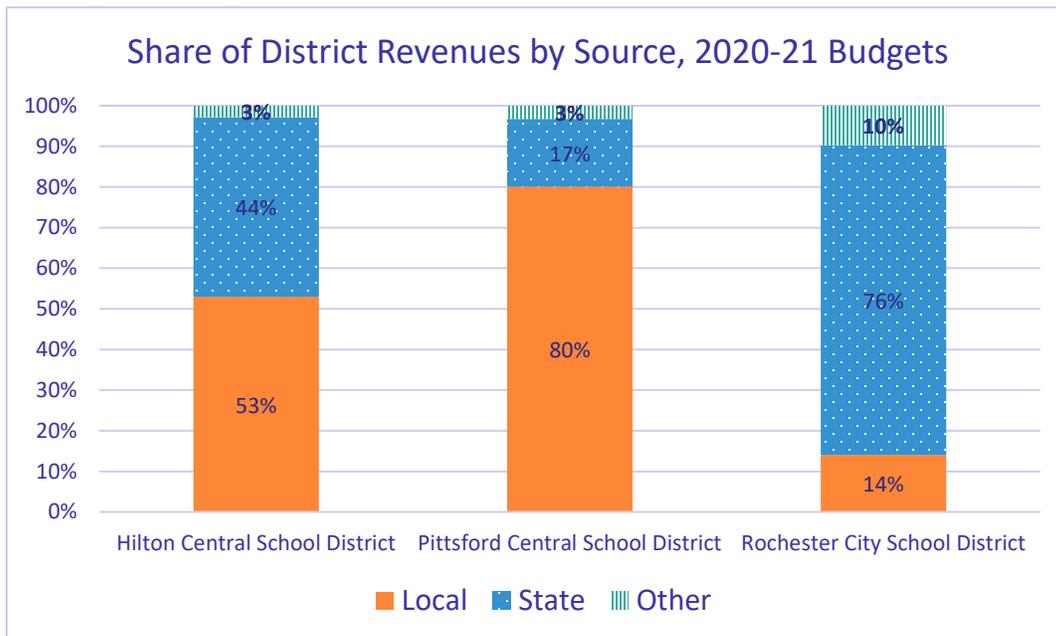
Even before accounting for varying levels of student need between districts, these vast differences in local capacity to generate revenues for schools demonstrates the need

for another form of school financing. The state's foundation aid formula was designed to address these inequities, and while New York State has never fully met its court-ordered financial obligations to school districts across the state, state aid is a critical financial support to schools throughout the state.

Structural Racism and School Funding

While some variability in local property values is natural, the extreme differences found in Monroe County, New York State, and much of the United States are the result of centuries of deliberately structurally racist government policies, as well as overt and subtle racism from private actors. In the 20th century alone, restrictive covenants, redlining, employment discrimination, highway construction, school district boundaries, interpersonal discrimination, and many other dynamics created staggering levels of racial inequality in our community today.^{iv} Cities like Rochester cannot raise enough local revenue to financially support their local schools because government policies and the collective actions of (mostly white) residents created conditions that make that task functionally impossible.

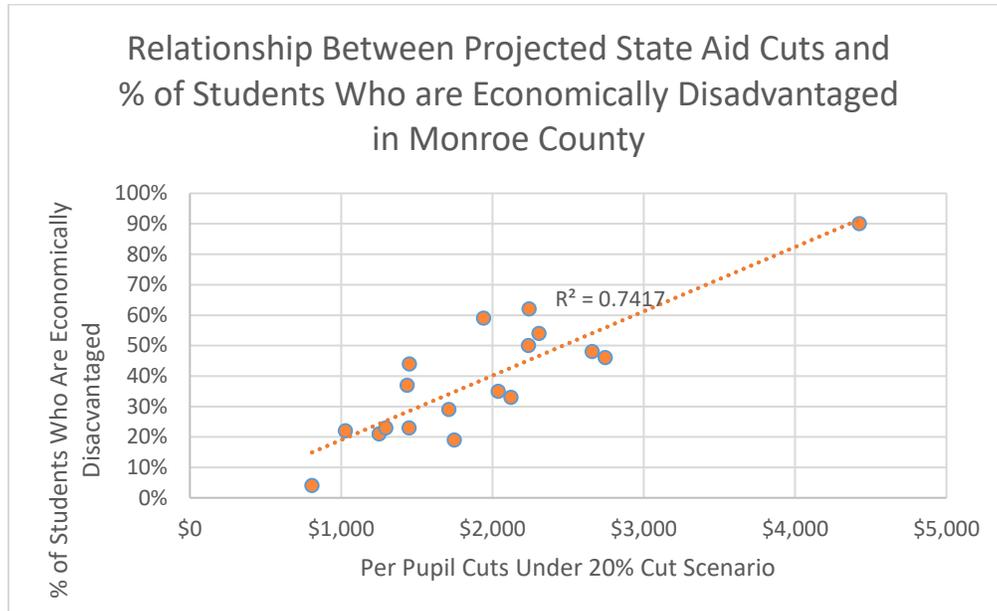
Across New York State in 2019, localities generated 59% of total education revenue, the state contributed 38%, and the federal government added 3%.^v In low need districts like Pittsford, local taxes comprised 80% of all revenues, while in the City of Rochester they made up less than 14% of RCSD's revenue.^{vi}



The Effect of Across the Board Cuts

As noted above, the state's school aid formula was deliberately designed to compensate for local funding inequities. A 20% cut to all districts in the state is therefore disproportionately harmful to districts serving higher needs students. The

wealthier a district is, the less dependent it is on state aid. Conversely, the poorer a community is, the more dependent it is on state aid. School districts with a greater share of economically disadvantaged students are projected to receive significantly higher cuts from New York State than those schools with few low-income students.^{vii} This pattern is clear within Monroe County, as shown by the chart below.

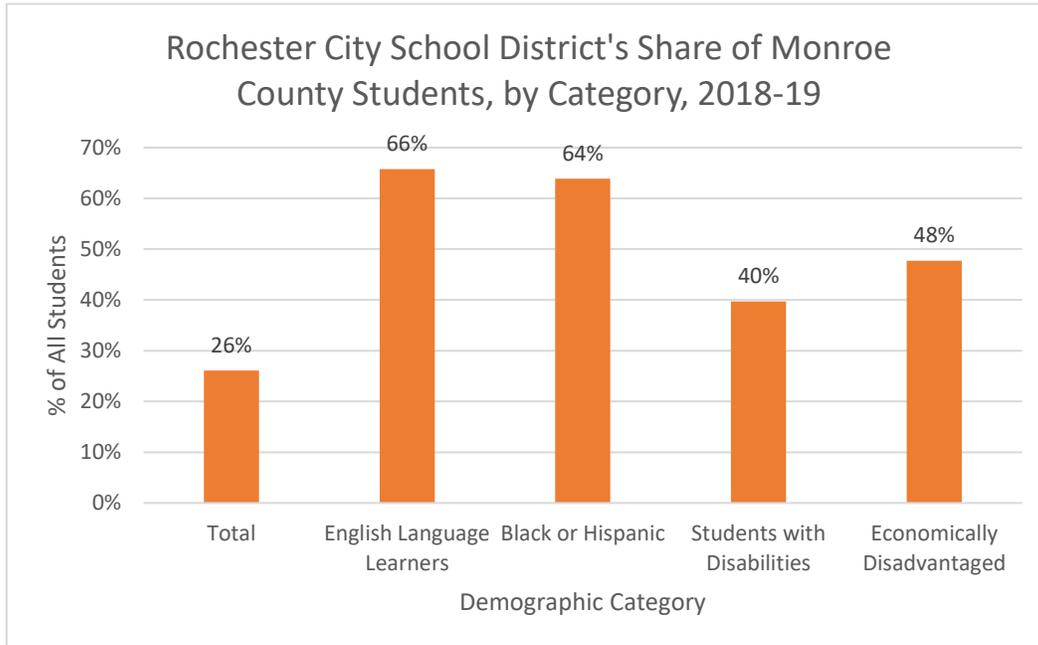


On September 2nd, the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) released a report analyzing the effects of 20% across the board cuts statewide.^{viii} High need districts, located in both the most rural and most urban parts of the state, stand to lose substantially more than districts located in more affluent suburban communities. According to that report:

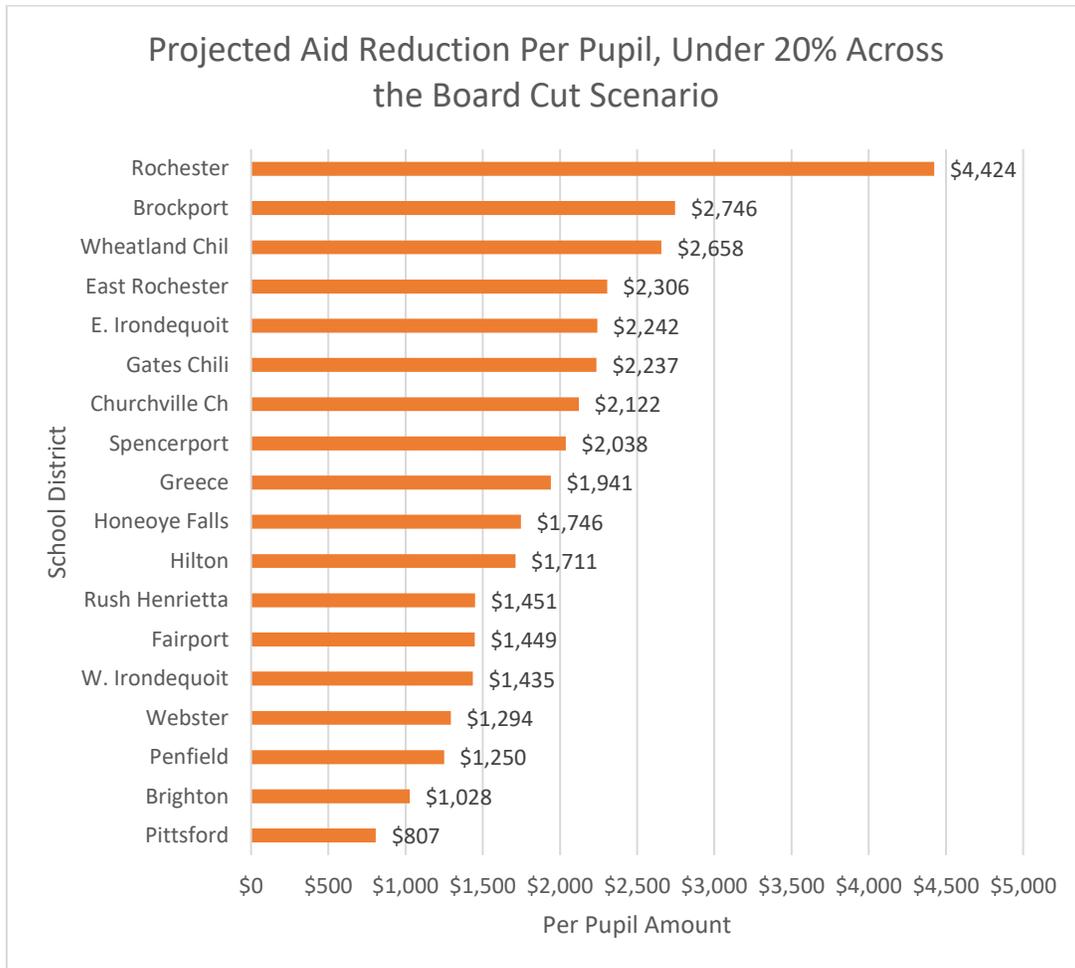
- A 20 percent cut in state aid to schools would equal \$5.7 billion.
- \$4 billion would be taken from 205 high need districts.
- These 205 school districts educate -
 - 75% of the economically disadvantaged students in the state,
 - 63% percent of Black and Hispanic students
 - 20% percent of students with disabilities
 - 13% of English Language Learners.

This pattern is even more pronounced in Monroe County. RCSD enrolls just over a quarter of all public school students in Monroe County, but has a far higher share of

English Language Learners, Black and Hispanic children, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged children, as shown in the chart below.^{ix}

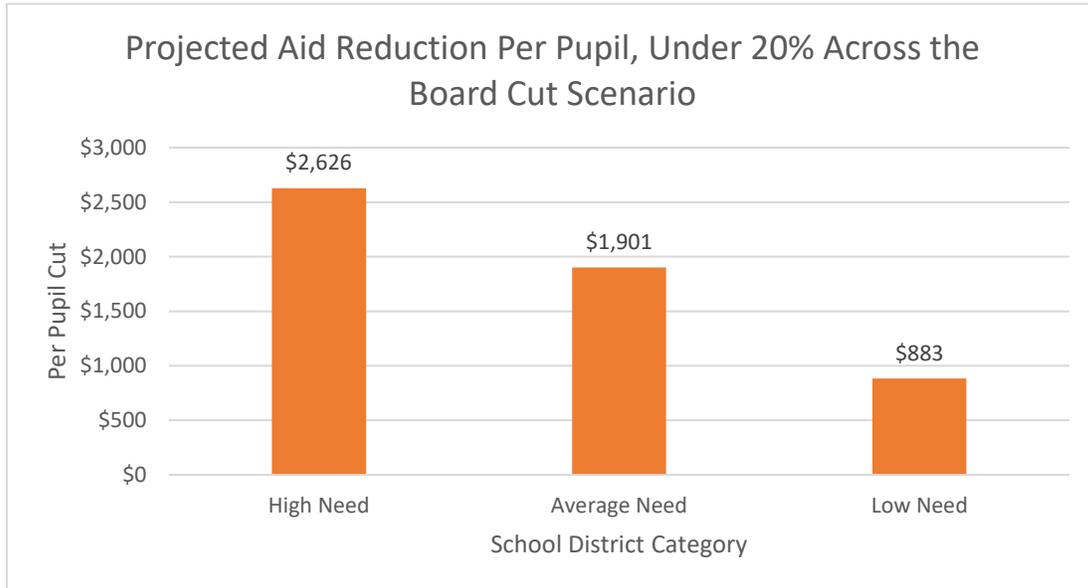


Under a 20% across the board cut scenario, AQE calculates that Monroe County would lose nearly \$262 million in state aid, or \$2,492 per student. RCSD would incur 53% of all cuts in the county, despite having only 26% of the county's students and the highest needs students. RCSD's losses would amount to a staggering **\$139 million, or \$4,424 per pupil.**



The cuts faced by districts in Monroe County are reflective of a larger pattern statewide. To help determine state aid amounts, New York State classifies districts as high need, average need, and low need (along with special categories for New York City and the Big 5 City School Districts). All non-City districts in Monroe County are considered average need districts except Brighton and Pittsford, which are considered low need districts. This classification is based on the poverty rate within a school district and the level of property wealth in that district. RCSD, by dint of having among

the highest poverty rates in New York State, would receive a substantially larger aid reduction than even relatively similar high need districts throughout the state.



Under a 20% across-the-board cut scenario, RCSD would lose more K-12 per pupil state aid than all but 30 schools across New York State. The schools that stand to lose more aid than RCSD are quite small (averaging 34 students per grade), and are located in some of the most rural parts of New York State. Those students are just as deserving of a quality education as their peers in more populated and wealthier regions of the state.

The effect of these inequitable proposed cuts will be felt by students in schools throughout New York State. After receiving word that the state was withholding scheduled August aid, several high need school districts in the Capital Region announced that the cuts forced them change their COVID-19 reopening plans.^x

School officials in Rochester have not publicly stated that the state's decision to withhold aid influenced RCSD's decision to switch to all remote education for the first ten weeks of the school year. However, not physically reopening schools has certainly saved the district money, especially when accompanied by layoffs of hundreds of support staff.^{xi} Other high need districts throughout the state that would be disproportionately harmed by across the board cuts have also switched to an all-remote start of the year.

As we noted in our September 8th policy brief about reopening schools,

“The Children’s Agenda believes reopening must be equitable, prioritizing the students who are most impacted by school closures. Shamefully, the current approach by New York State is institutionally racist, taking the most resources away from predominantly poor, and Black and brown students to balance the New York State Budget. As a result, the school districts serving the highest proportion of poor, and Black and brown students are offering the least amount

of in-person instruction. This is the opposite of how we should be prioritizing our resources, and New York State must do everything possible to reverse course.”^{xii}

Decisions about whether to physically return to the classroom should be driven by science and the needs of students, not finances. By dangling the prospect of 20% across the board cuts to school districts for months, our state’s leaders have deepened educational inequity and demonstrated an evident lack of concern about the educational fates of poor and Black and brown children.

Better Options for Closing New York State’s Budget Gap

Governor Cuomo has pinned responsibility for this financial crisis on the federal government, arguing that New York State needs an infusion of federal funds to offset massive revenue losses caused by the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The federal government, unlike state governments, is not obligated to balance its budget each year, and with historically low interest rates, can borrow money cheaply right now. An infusion of federal support for state and local governments would also likely strengthen our nation’s economic recovery from this crisis, benefiting countless children and families.

However, the fact that the federal government is best positioned to provide relief to school districts and local governments does not absolve state officials from their own responsibilities. New York has many better options for closing this year’s budget deficit than cutting billions in school aid from high need districts.

New York State has to make some difficult choices to balance the state’s operating budget during this crisis. In the past, New York State has turned to a mix of tax increases and spending cuts to balance the state’s budget, as it is difficult to close an enormous budget deficit exclusively on one side of the ledger.^{xiii}

Revenue Proposals Worth Considering

Tax Increases on High Income Households: There are a number of proposals in the state legislature to raise taxes on ultra-rich residents, although the Governor, fearful that wealthy taxpayers will leave New York if the state raises their taxes, has balked at a range of proposals. Tax flight is a complicated subject and not central to the purpose of this report. There is some evidence that raising taxes on top income earners causes a small number of wealthy individuals to escape to lower tax environs. However, the incidence appears to be quite small, and not disruptive to a state’s financial outlook.^{xiv} Given that evidence, and the options before policymakers, an at least temporary income tax on top income earners during the pandemic and recovery seems prudent.

Pied-à-terre tax: A pied-à-terre tax, which imposes an assessment on high-value luxury residential properties that are not used by their owners as a primary residence, was nearly enacted in 2019 and should be strongly considered this year as well. That

tax could raise \$500 million per year, primarily from individuals who do not pay state income taxes but still benefit from state and local public services.^{xv}

Pause the implementation of a planned tax cut: New York State is also in the midst of a multi-year effort to implement a tax cut for middle class taxpayers (defined broadly). This tax cut, which extends to households making between \$28k and \$323k per year, is scheduled to lower taxes by \$4.2 billion annually when fully enacted in 2025.^{xvi} Given the severity of the state's budget challenge and the devastating cuts faced by school districts, New York State should consider pausing the implementation of that cut for several years.

Ways to Approach Spending Reductions

After considering ways to raise revenues, New York State will likely have to find ways to reduce spending during this fiscal year, and likely into the future. In doing so, surely the state can find better ways to do so than on backs of students in the highest need districts in the state. Aside from obvious places to cut spending like the state's \$420 million film tax credit, policymakers should consider the role school aid plays in funding local school districts, and adjust cuts accordingly.

As explored earlier, across the board cuts disproportionately harm high need districts because state aid makes up a larger share of high need district budgets. Rather than applying cuts to every district, the state could limit cuts to school districts able to raise sufficient local revenues to support their schools. The Citizens Budget Commission has identified \$1.6 billion in aid targeted to wealthy districts. Reducing aid to the wealthiest quintile of school districts in the state is a far more equitable approach than the current plan.^{xvii}

Lessons and Next Steps for Rochester and Monroe County

Just as the federal government's failure to provide sufficient relief to New York State does not absolve the State from its responsibilities to New York's children, the State's failure to support our community's school does not excuse our collective failure to support the Rochester City School District.

Over the past several decades, the Greater Rochester region has largely abdicated any sense of a collective responsibility to fund the Rochester City School District through local revenues, and has instead passed all responsibility to New York State. The City of Rochester is obligated by New York State to provide \$119 million to the school district each year, and chooses to not exceed that funding level.^{xviii} This year, Monroe County plans to distribute a total of \$361,500,000 in sales tax revenues to the City of Rochester, the twenty towns and ten villages, and every school district in the county except RCSD.^{xix} RCSD cannot raise any local revenues on its own, unlike every other school district in our region, and has become nearly fully dependent on state budget agreements each year.

This crisis could not have come at a worse time for RCSD. Years of poor district financial management, dwindling enrollment, and chronic underfunding have left the district without any cash reserves to weather these cuts. As things currently stand, RCSD anticipates running out of cash in January, 2021 and would approach \$40 million in debt by the mid-spring. The district's leadership is understandably focused on finding enough cost reductions to stave off the prospect of not making payroll later this year, while also trying to ensure that both the basic and educational needs of Pre-K through 12th grade children can be met.

There is a great deal of concern throughout Monroe County about the education of Rochester's children. However, to date, that broader community has not adopted any significant policies that would address the unmet educational needs of those children. This state funding crisis should be a wake-up call to our community's leaders, and should compel them to determine a new, shared path for supporting the education of all children in this county.

In their book, "Striving in Common," co-authors Kara Finnigan and Jennifer Jellison Holme describe a new framework for urban schools based on regional governance and equity. They argue that, "many of the inequities entrenched in the US educational system are caused by broader dynamics across a region – particularly the systems of competitive relationships between school districts that, when overlaid on historic patterns of housing and school segregation and economic development, contribute to deepening inequality and segregation."^{xx}

Rochester and Monroe County are a case study in support of that book's thesis. To address that structural inequity, Finnigan and Holme argue for a more federated regional equity approach based on five strategies:

- Tax Base Sharing and Resource Redistribution
- In-Place Investment Policies Funded by Regional Resources
- Mobility Policies
- Regional Governance
- Cross-Sector Approaches

Together, these five strategies are designed to unravel the complex systems that perpetuate racial and economic segregation and inequity in our region's school system.

Recommendations for Local Leaders

The budget crisis being imposed upon RCSD should spur our community's leaders to develop a new plan, based on Finnigan and Holme's recommendations, to address educational inequity in our region, starting with a new approach to tax base sharing and resource redistribution. Our community needs to come together and begin to dismantle the structures that have prevented children in Rochester from receiving the education that they deserve. We cannot continue to turn to state government to address the gross inequities present in our community. Our community's leaders should develop and implement a plan to distribute county sales tax revenues more equitably by ensuring that higher needs school districts in the county receive a greater

share of those funds. This plan should also include a mechanism to pool property tax revenues throughout the county.

The governance of this regional approach to revenue sharing could be done within the existing structure of county government, through a partnership of school districts, or some other mechanism like a revived Monroe County Council of Governments.^{xxi} A revenue sharing plan could also establish a framework for future efforts to equitably increase cross-district student enrollment, improve socio-economic and racial diversity throughout the county, and ultimately, build support for a move toward countywide schools.

Conclusion

Frederick Douglass once said, “To deny education to any people is one of the greatest crimes against human nature. It is to deny them the means of freedom and the rightful pursuit of happiness, and to defeat the very end of their being.”

The COVID-19 public health crisis, coupled with the threat of staggeringly high state cuts to education aid, represents a functional denial of education to children in high need districts like RCSD. Our public education system should aspire to serve an egalitarian function, striving to ensure that children of all skin colors, backgrounds, and family resources are able to receive a sound education. We have never achieved that lofty goal, but we can view it as a north star to guide our efforts. The prospects of unequal access to in-person education throughout the entire school year and disproportionately high cuts to the neediest districts threaten to move us further away from that goal than anytime in at least the past 50 years.

Our state and local leaders must take action to ensure that our schools are funded and our children are able to learn. At the state level, that means finding ways to maintain school aid, especially within high need districts. Locally, it means identifying and dismantling the structures that perpetuate racial inequity in our education system. This should begin by addressing the way we fund our schools, and should continue until every child from every background and zip code in our community receives a quality education.

Endnotes

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- ⁱⁱ See <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/repcrd2005/information/similar-schools/guide.shtml> for an explanation of how New York State identifies level of need.
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<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2019/08/07/472617/systemic-inequality-displacement-exclusion-segregation/>
- ^v 2020-21 State Aid Handbook, New York State (website), 2020, Accessed September 21, 2020 https://stateaid.nysed.gov/publications/handbooks/handbook_2020.pdf
- ^{vi} Calculated from approved 2020-21 School District Budgets downloaded from school district websites.
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- ^{viii} Alliance for Quality Education, Marina Marcou O'Malley, *Set Up To Fail: How Cuomo's School Cuts Target New York's Black & Brown Students*, Accessed September 15, 2020 <https://www.aqeny.org/2020/09/02/set-up-to-fail-how-cuomos-school-cuts-target-new-yorks-black-brown-students/>
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^{xvi} “Governor Andrew Cuomo Announces Highlights of the FY 2021 State Budget,” New York State (website), April 2, 2020, Accessed September 2, 2020 <https://www.budget.ny.gov/pubs/press/2020/fy-2021-state-budget-highlights.html>

^{xvii} Citizens Budget Commission, David Friedfel, “Target School Aid to Avoid the Most Painful Cuts,” May 12, 2020. Accessed September 15, 2020 <https://cbcny.org/newsroom/target-school-aid-avoid-most-painful-cuts>

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