

NEWS & OPPORTUNITIES

ADVOCACY & POLICY

DISTRICT HIGHLIGHTS

THE VOICE DIGEST

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NEW YORK STATE ASSOCIATION OF
SMALL CITY SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Welcome Back Message from Bob Breidenstein, Executive Director

“United, our voice cannot be ignored!”

Welcome back to a new school year! As we enter 2025-26, our association is moving with purpose and urgency. Small city school districts matter and together we are determined to ensure Albany and Washington hear us loud and clear.

This year, our priorities are clear: **press for fair and equitable funding, elevate the unique needs of small city districts and equip you with the tools to lead boldly in your communities.**

But we cannot do it alone. The strength of our Association depends on the full participation of every district. If you haven't yet renewed or joined, now is the time. United, our voice cannot be ignored.



I also encourage you to take time with this **special edition** of the **Voice Digest**. Inside, you'll find important updates, resources and opportunities that will shape the year ahead. Together, let's make 2025-26 a year of action, impact and unstoppable advocacy for New York's small city schools.



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About The Voice Digest

Welcome to this Special Edition of The Voice Digest, the quarterly newsletter of the New York State Association of Small City School Districts. This publication is the collective voice of our 57 districts and a vital tool for uniting leaders, amplifying advocacy, and strengthening communities.

Each issue delivers:

- **Advocacy & Policy Updates** – Key developments that impact funding and legislation.
- **Leadership Insights** – Strategies and perspectives from superintendents and board members.
- **Opportunities & Resources** – Grants, programs, and tools for districts.
- **Student & Youth Voice** – Celebrating the achievements of our students.
- **District Spotlights** – Stories of innovation and resilience.

Our theme, **Empowering Leaders, Strengthening Communities**, underscores why we encourage every reader to engage fully with each edition and share it widely. Together, we ensure that small city schools are heard and valued across New York.

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BRIAN BAILEY



COREY GRAVES



DOUGLAS LAWRENCE



GREGORY MOTT



PATRICIA MURRAY



ONYX PETERSON



DEMARIO STRICKLAND

Welcome to Our New Superintendents

The Association proudly welcomes seven new leaders who have taken the helm of small city school districts for the 2025–26 school year. Their leadership, vision, and commitment will play a vital role in shaping the future of our schools and communities.

- **Dr. Brian Bailey** – Hudson CSD (Interim)
- **Mr. Corey Graves** – Vernon Verona Sherrill CSD
- **Douglas Lawrence** – Fulton CSD
- **Mr. Gregory Mott** – Poughkeepsie City School District
- **Dr. Patricia Murray** – Rye CSD
- **Ms. Onyx Peterson** – Newburgh Enlarged City School District (Interim)
- **Dr. Demario A. Strickland** – Mount Vernon City School District

At the Association, we know that your network is your net worth. As these leaders step into their new roles, they join a community where seasoned superintendents and new voices work side by side — sharing best practices, learning from each other, and strengthening the collective voice of small city schools.

➡ Please join us in welcoming our newest superintendents—and in building the connections that empower all of us to lead boldly.

Small City Board of Directors Stakeholder Calls with Commissioner Rosa and Her Leadership Team: Your Voice at the Table

Each month, NYSED Commissioner Betty Rosa and her leadership team meet with the Association's Board of Directors and invited guests. These stakeholder calls provide timely updates and direct access to issues that matter most to small city school districts.

Topics often include Foundation Aid, Pre-K funding, accountability and graduation measures, student safety, and emerging policy priorities from Albany and Washington and are driven from YOU! There is monthly outreach to Association members requesting agenda items for the Board to bring forward in discussions. Small City School District Board members please mark your calendar for meeting dates:

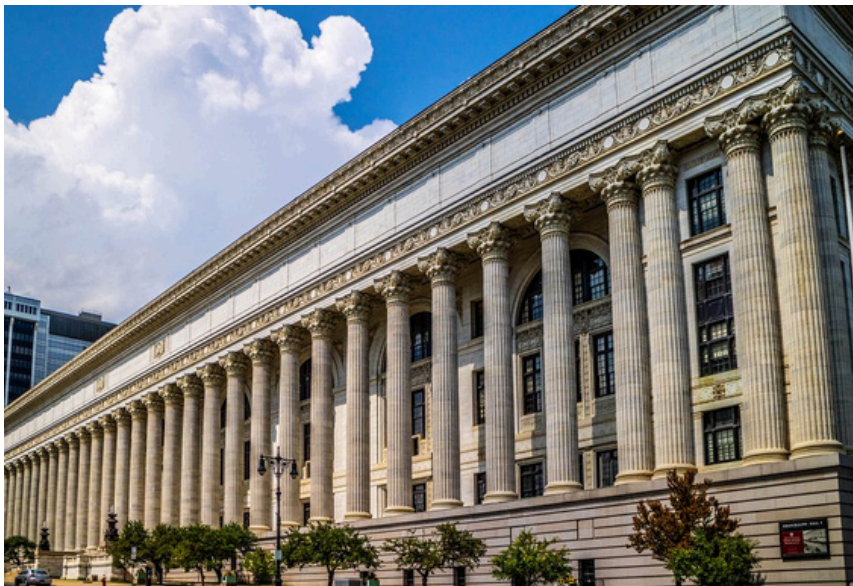
September 23rd at 4:30 pm

October 15th at 2:30 pm

November 24th at 1:30 pm

December 17th at 2:30 pm

Does your district have a question for Commissioner Rosa and her leadership team? Email your questions or topics to **Beth Biggerstaff at beb@biggerstaff-firm.com** and we will share the findings with you after the next Stakeholder call.



Advocacy Update: Realigning Foundation Aid for Small City Districts



Over the summer, Association Directors have been laying the groundwork for critical fall conversations with legislative leaders and policymakers in Albany. At the center of this work is the Foundation Aid formula, its history, its shortcomings, and the urgent need for reform.

Executive Director Robert Breidenstein and Deputy Executive Director Elizabeth Biggerstaff continue to work with **Dr. Bruce D. Baker**, a nationally recognized school finance scholar with longstanding ties to the Association. Dr. Baker is prepared to share a costing-out analysis that will clearly show policymakers the true level of aid needed to adequately fund public education in New York. Until the state commits to fully addressing the issue, the Association will continue to provide practical solutions that bring small city districts closer to the intended purposes of Foundation Aid:

- Ensuring every student, pre-K through grade 12, receives an effective education.
- Maintaining a strong State-local partnership in public education.
- Equalizing school revenues by supporting districts with less ability to raise local funds.
- Encouraging model programs such as community schools and technology integration.
- Supporting students with disabilities and those requiring additional help to reach higher standards.

Dr. Baker's analysis underscores the urgency of change. He concludes that:

1. The current formula does not set levels of aid near what successful districts actually spend to achieve adequate outcomes. It continues to drift further from funding for success.
2. District needs, expectations, and costs have grown dramatically while the formula remains regressive.

In August, Association leaders met with **NYSED Deputy Commissioner & CFO Christina Coughlin, State Aid Office staff, and Regents Subcommittee Co-chairs Dr. Frances Wills and Dr. Roger Catania.**

Joining the discussion were superintendents Paul Padalino (Kingston), Jay LeBrun (Plattsburgh), Corey Reynolds (New Rochelle), Tonia Thompson (Binghamton), and Christopher Spence (Utica). Their first-hand accounts highlighted the fiscal realities districts face in meeting the needs of high-need student populations.

The message was well-received. Aid must be more robustly targeted to those districts that are educating larger populations of at-risk students. There remains a gap between the programs and staffing our experienced small city administrators know are necessary and the ability to fund them. Small city taxpayers have taxed at a higher rate than their suburban and non-city counterparts for decades. It is paramount the state fulfill the promise of foundation aid and get resources to these students.

What's Next: Turning Advocacy Into Action



DR. BRUCE BAKER

The work continues. This fall, your Association will move from research to action—and **YOUR VOICE** will be essential!

➔ **Policy Paper Release** – Dr. Baker's full report will be shared with members this fall, equipping you with data and analysis to strengthen your advocacy.

➔ **Taking It to Albany** – Association leaders will carry these findings to legislative leaders and policymakers during the fall session.

➔ **Member Advocacy in Action** – District leaders will be armed with talking points and tools to ensure Albany understands the urgent need to direct resources where they are needed most: to our students in small city districts.

Stay tuned and be ready to join us. **TOGETHER**, we will keep the pressure on for fair, equitable Foundation Aid.



Pharmaceutical Settlement: Is Your District Eligible for Recovery?

The Association is alerting member districts to an important pharmaceutical damage recovery opportunity tied to national litigation against pharmaceutical companies and PBM's (Pharmacy Benefit Managers) for price-fixing, collusion, and overcharging on prescription medications. This case is now in the settlement phase, and districts may be entitled to compensation.

Districts who are self-insured (consortiums included) with 200 or more covered members (employees + dependents, or retirees) on their health insurance plan qualify.

The program allows for a 14-year look-back period on generic drugs and a 20 year look-back on insulin drugs, with no upfront cost to participate; any fees are contingency-based and only apply if a recovery is awarded.

Deadline: **Claims must be filed by November 15, 2025.**

The Association has partnered with Pearl Logic to coordinate this effort. To determine eligibility and begin the process, please contact **Bob Breidenstein, Executive Director at 716-220-2815** or via mail to: smallcitiesdirector@gmail.com

Enhanced Website: Fresh Look. Bigger Impact!

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Our Mission

Our mission is to amplify the voice of small-city school districts through legislative advocacy, professional development



The Association is proud to unveil our improved, fully interactive website, built exclusively for YOU, our superintendents, board members, and leaders across New York's 57 small city districts. This isn't just a facelift, it's a game-changer. Here's what you'll find:

1. **Networking Like Never Before** – A space for superintendents and board members, new and seasoned to connect, exchange ideas, and learn best practices. Because your network is your net worth.
2. **Hot Off the Press Advocacy News** – Stay ahead with real-time updates on Foundation Aid, legislative action, and policy shifts that affect your district.
3. **Resources at Your Fingertips** – Practical tools, data, legal insights, and guidance tailored to the unique challenges of small city districts.
4. **Spotlight Stories** – Celebrating the innovation and impact of small city schools across New York.
5. **Events & Engagement** – Easy access to upcoming seminars, conferences, and advocacy opportunities.

This new website is more than a resource, it's a hub for connection, empowerment, and action. It's where advocacy meets community, and where small city leaders unite to shape the future.

Explore the new website today and see how it can strengthen your district and our collective voice.

[CLICK HERE >](#)



The Power of Collaboration: A Win for Small City Schools

At the NYSCOSS Conference on September 28, 2025 in Saratoga Springs, NYSASCSD's session, **"The Power of Collaboration: A Win for Small City Schools**, Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet" was nothing short of powerful. **Rob Watson, Harvard University, EdRedesign and Dr. Eric Rosser, Superintendent, Rochester City School District** delivered an exceptional conversation on the transformative power of collaboration between schools, cities, and communities. The room was energized, and the message was clear: when leaders unite, small city districts can set the agenda and drive real change.

If you missed it, you missed a game-changing session, but don't worry. More conversations on collaboration will continue in upcoming **pop-up Zoom meetings**, and full footage from the conference will be available soon on our **website** and **YouTube** channel. Don't miss your chance to catch the insights that are shaping the future of small city schools.

Schools in Action – Show Off Your District!

Your district's story deserves to be seen! We're building our **Schools in Action** gallery on our website to showcase the incredible work happening across New York's small city school districts in photos and video. From classrooms to community events, let's put your students and staff in the spotlight.

Send your **best, high quality, clear** photos and video footage to **info@smallcityschools.org** and help us highlight the innovation, spirit, and success of small city schools statewide!

For questions or more information contact **Dr. Felicia Watson** at **fwatson@biggerstaff-firm.com**



DR. JEFFREY MATTESON



Inaugural Governance Retreat: Driving Bold Solutions for Small City Districts

The Association's first-ever Governance Retreat, held August 14–15 at the Rivers Casino & Resort in Schenectady, brought together a select group of leaders from New York State's 57 small city school districts for two days of strategic planning, high-level dialogue, and actionable advocacy.

Conceived by Executive Director **Bob Breidenstein** alongside Deputy Executive Director **Elizabeth Biggerstaff** and hosted by Association President **John Carmello**, Superintendent of the Enlarged City School District of Troy, the inaugural event proved highly impactful. Newly appointed **Felicia Watson**, Director of Strategic Engagement & Growth, assisted in coordination and secured **Jeff Matteson**, **NYSED Senior Deputy Commissioner for Education Policy**, as the retreat's featured speaker, a move that gave attendees an unparalleled front-row opportunity to engage directly with one of the state's leading education policymakers. Jeff delivered a compelling overview of the **Portrait of a Graduate**, the statewide initiative highlighting the essential skills and attributes students need to thrive in college, careers, and civic life. Participants engaged in robust discussions on:

- Federal and state education priorities and their implications for small city districts.
- The future and sustainability of Foundation Aid.
- Translating critical field concerns into actionable policy.
- Planning coordinated lobbying efforts to strengthen influence in Albany and Washington, DC.

The retreat offered a true *think-tank experience*, where every voice was heard, innovative ideas were explored, and strategies were designed for measurable impact on students and communities. The insights and strategies generated at this retreat will guide the Association's advocacy efforts throughout the year.

Hear more from Jeff Matteson and highlights from the retreat on our website.

[CLICK HERE >](#)

Membership Matters: Why Join The Association?

As a former Board of Education member for nine years, including five years as president, Dr. Felicia Watson, our new Director Strategic Engagement, knows firsthand how critical it is to have a unified voice in Albany and Washington. The New York State Association of Small City School Districts ensures that our concerns are heard, our funding is protected, and our students receive the opportunities they deserve.

Why Membership Matters:

- **Advocacy:** Policymakers, including the Governor's Office, Division of Budget, NYSED, and legislators actively seek the Association's input on Foundation Aid, accountability, and graduation measures.
- **Access:** Members gain direct engagement with decision-makers, regular legislative updates, and monthly calls with the Commissioner's team.
- **Networking:** A statewide network of superintendents and board members to share strategies, best practices, and solutions. Your network is your net worth.
- **Events & Resources:** Exclusive access to seminars, conferences, policy papers, and the Governance Retreat—giving members the inside track on critical issues.

If your district has not yet joined, we encourage you to take that step and be part of the solution. For membership information contact: **Elizabeth E. Biggerstaff, Deputy Executive Director, at beb@biggerstaff-firm.com**

Legislative Services: Clearing the Path for SUCCESS!

Does your school district face challenges that could be addressed through **new legislation** or **regulatory changes**? The Biggerstaff Law Firm has successfully represented individual districts for years and stands ready to help.

Contact Robert Biggerstaff at reb@biggerstaff-firm.com or 518-475-9500 x102 to discuss district-specific legislative or regulatory issues. Biggerstaff Law firm offers up to 5 hours gratis advisory support as a part of membership.



Mark Your Calendar

Small City Lunch at NYSSBA Annual Convention & Education Expo

- Date/Time: Friday, October 24, 2025 | 11:45 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.
- Location: The Cornell Club, 6 E 44th St., New York, NY 10017
- Speakers: **Dr. Bruce Baker**, University of Miami Professor & Chair of the Department of Teaching and Learning on the topic **New York's Foundation Aid Formula: Adrift and Sinking**
Michael DiPerna, K-12 Department Manager C & S Companies
- Fee: No cost to attend. Open to Small City School District Members & Non-Members
- **Sponsor:** Opterra Energy Services



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Have questions about the work of the association?

Connect with Elizabeth Biggerstaff, our Deputy Executive Director and the driving force behind so much of what we do. Beth is here to help ensure you have the information and support you need.

Email: beb@biggerstaff-firm.com