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JOHN MEORE/THE JOURNAL NEWS

State urged to call off interdistrict sharing plan

Group representing area school leaders opposed

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The state Education Department is trying to coax school districts to consider new ways of sharing resources, staff and programs, in large part because officials fear that coming cuts in state aid could leave some districts unable to give students a full education.

As a result, New Yorkers may hear a lot next year about so-called “regionalization” of school services.

“Knowing that resources are limited ... if you share, there is a lot more you can do,” state Education Commissioner Betty Rosa told The Journal News/lohud.

The Education Department wants to see new regional efforts beginning in September 2026.

But a group representing superintendents in the Lower Hudson Valley says the initiative is poorly conceived, will waste time, and won’t save money. They want the state to kill the plan.

“While we appreciate legislative reforms that promote interdistrict collaboration and innovation, regionalization, as proposed, will neither significantly expand opportunities for students nor generate meaningful cost savings between or among school districts,” said an Oct. 23 letter from the Lower Hudson Council of School Superintendents, which includes schools chiefs in Westchester, Rockland, Putnam and Dutchess, to Rosa and the state Board of Regents.

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Sharing

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The superintendents group wants the state to “retract” the plan.

Some superintendents and politicians on Long Island have also spoken out against the plan.

Ultimately, participation will be voluntary, Rosa said. All schools districts are required to be part of initial planning for regionalization, she said, but will not have to participate in any new regional programs if they choose not to.

The New York State Council of School Superintendents wants that in writing, calling on the state Board of Regents to make the voluntary nature of the initiative part of state regulations.

What does NYS Education Department mean by regionalization?

State officials are basically asking schools districts in 37 regions of New York to consider fresh ways they can share or pool money, staff and programs, across district boundaries, to better serve more students.

They say they’re trying to close a “transcript gap” that separates New York students who have lots of educational opportunities from those whose schools offer far less.

What those fresh approaches might look like, and how they might be implemented, is unclear.

New York’s 37 BOCES operations will oversee regionalization talks among their member school districts, for which they already provide a range of business, technological and educational services. Each BOCES superintendent is charged with developing regional plans, a heavy lift for sure.

“My role is to facilitate discussions, to open the door to foster ways for districts to enhance educational access for students,” said Harold Coles, superintendent of Southern Westchester BOCES — or Board of Cooperative Educational Services — which provides services to 32 districts with about 100,000 students. “The (education) commissioner wants to see where we are regionally, to make sure students can access opportunities if fiscal constraints are imposed in the future.

“Some superintendents we’ve talked to have misgivings,” Coles said. “Right now, there is an opportunity to look at what we’re facing. But no one will be forced to do this.”

Both Rockland BOCES Superintendent Christopher D’Ambrese and Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES Superintendent Neil Boyle have met with superintendents in their regions.

“Next steps beyond the required data collection will be determined only after our superintendents have a clearer picture of this initiative,” D’Ambrese said.

“We look forward to learning more about this in the future,” Boyle said.

Targets include mental health, special ed, career/technical ed

What areas could be ripe for regional approaches?

“We’re talking about advanced cour-



“Knowing that resources are limited ... if you share, there is a lot more you can do,” state Education Commissioner Betty Rosa said. MARK VERGARI/THE JOURNAL NEWS



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sework, shared staff, extracurricular activities, a range of subjects,” Jeffrey Matteson, senior state deputy education commissioner, told the state Board of Regents in September.

State and local officials have floated ideas about regional approaches to providing mental health services to students, serving students with uncommon disabilities, and making advanced courses available to students who can’t access them in their schools.

Ideas that have come up at BOCES-led discussions this fall, according to the state Education Department, include allowing a group of schools to share teachers in high-need areas by developing a common bell schedule for teachers and a common course catalogue.

Coles said early talks among southern Westchester districts have looked at developing collaborative programs for career and technical education, for special education, and for courses for which it’s becoming hard to find teachers, like in the sciences.

Matteson, when asked whether such programs would be virtual or would require busing students and/or staff, told The Journal News/lohud it’s too early to say. “We don’t want to predetermine this,” he said. “Just by giving examples, people may think ‘We have to work on that.’”

To get the process rolling, all school districts must submit lengthy forms that identify their strengths and needs to the state Education Department by Dec. 6.

The 37 BOCES superintendents must submit interim reports to the Education Department by April 1. Discussions are supposed to include business groups, colleges, parents, local unions and others.

Each BOCES is to submit a final regionalization plan to the state by Oct. 1, 2025, to be implemented in the fall of 2026.

The long-term goal is for each region of New York to update its plan every 10 years.

Expected cuts in state aid behind regionalization urgency

Money is behind the regionalization push.

The state started thinking about promoting regionalization several years ago, Rosa said, but the matter became urgent last year when Gov. Kathy Hochul proposed radically slowing the growth of state “Foundation Aid,” the main form of state aid to school districts.

It’s longstanding practice in New York that no school district gets a year-to-year cut in Foundation Aid. But Hochul proposed reducing aid to about half of New York’s 673 districts — including 28 out of 54 in Westchester, Rockland and Putnam counties.

Hochul and legislative leaders did not include those cuts in this year’s state budget, but did hire a think tank in Albany to propose changes to the Foundation Aid formula. The Rockefeller Institute, which has been collecting input from across New York, is due to submit its finding next month.

Rosa believes that Hochul is serious about reigning in Foundation Aid, which at \$25 billion represents 10.5% of the state budget. If aid is cut to many districts, Rosa said, it would create financial crises for some districts and necessitate regional help.

“There are enough (people) telling us to plan ahead, the storm is coming,” Rosa said. “There are no federal dollars for a bailout. Heed the warning. What we are saying is that we have to plan now.”

This defensive posture is a mistake because it sends a message to Hochul that the education community is ready to accept cuts to aid, said Marc Baiocco, president of the Lower Hudson Council of School Superintendents.

“We’re worried that this link between possible cuts to Foundation Aid and regionalization may undermine the stability of funding for school districts,” said Baiocco, superintendent of the Clarkstown schools.

Baiocco also said that superintendents, who must prepare detailed budgets annually, don’t see how regionalization would reduce costs in meaningful ways.

Rosa suggested that the letter from the Lower Hudson superintendents group represented only a small circle of superintendents and not its full membership. She also scoffed at their suggestion that regionalization would not save money.

“It won’t save money? How do they know that?” she said.

Rosa insisted that school districts that don’t want to take part in regionalization efforts won’t have to.

“We’re not going to force you to share resources or take any districts’ kids or anything like that,” she said.

Baiocco said the Superintendents Council’s letter represented a significant number of superintendents but not necessarily a unanimous point of view.

The Education Department is taking on the regionalization push as it is well underway with its most ambitious project in decades, updating New York’s requirements for high school graduation. New standards are supposed to be in place for students who start ninth grade in 2029.