

Dear Chairs May, Santabarbara, Thiele and Members of the New York State Legislative Commission on Rural Resources and the New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Local Governments,

I am David Little, Executive Director of the Rural Schools Association of New York State and the Rural Schools Program of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University. I am grateful that you have focused on this critically important issue and honored to appear before you today.

While the economy of our state progresses at a moderate pace, rural New York State is in crisis. The population of New York City has increased over the last decade. Long Island and the four other major cities have all either increased slightly or retained their population. Not so in rural New York, where the next U.S. Census is likely to immortalize the fact that roughly a million people have fled in recent years. The Great Recession decimated the rural economy and unlike other states (where rural businesses and their employees relocated within their state to urban or suburban areas) in New York, people exited the state in a Grapes of Wrath-like outward migration; in search of work.

This largely unacknowledged calamity has resulted in historic declines in student enrollment in our schools, the deterioration of our communities and a unique pattern of young adult migration that will, if left unaddressed, leave our state at an economic competitive disadvantage. You see, young (largely college educated) adults leave home. It's a rite of passage. In other states, however, they return (statistically) to raise their own families. That is not occurring in our state and has not occurred for many years. We do a wonderful job of educating our college-age students and then (as a result of our failure to provide employment opportunities in their home communities) we lose them forever. It's no way to build our state's future and yet to date, we have no comprehensive economic development plan for an area that was so fiscally vibrant just 40 years ago, it was able to help stave off financial disaster in New York City. Now that our state's economic expansion is taking place downstate, it's time to return the favor.

One of the most significant impediments to rural economic expansion is the inability of businesses to gain access to broadband internet service. Schools and hospitals often serve as the "anchors" for a community's access and all too often offer the only access within the community. In the long term, this creates tremendous disadvantages for our students, who must compete with urban and suburban counterparts who enjoy easy access to the internet. Learning today, both in form and content rely on internet access. Our failure to provide it to rural students is a societal failing that limits their employability and often forces them from their homes. As SUNY Cobleskill President Dr. Marion Terenzio says, our policy is a barrier to our progress.

I am not naive enough to think that lack of broadband is all that stands between our circumstances and rural economic prosperity. Our state battles high taxes, high per capita debt, comparatively high transportation costs, an aging infrastructure and other challenges that put us at a competitive disadvantage when vying for potential economic development projects. Yet, it

is the lack of broadband access that prevents us from even attempting to somehow overcome the other issues and secure rural employment opportunities. From an educational standpoint, lack of broadband is devastating. Our schools are so desperate to provide this game changing information source that Watkins Glen and other rural schools park their buses in remote areas as wifi hotspots for their students. Broadband is the library of its day, today's encyclopedia, the source of knowledge itself as well as the most accessible and often most effective way to learn it. The internet is today's school bus, overcoming time and place (as well as transportation inequity) to bring the world to physically isolated students. Should you doubt the impact of broadband internet effectiveness to learning, ask the Pentagon what it thinks of the video game Call of Duty, where millions of the young people of the exact demographic they require are being trained on military tactics, chain of command, loyalty in the field, weapon systems, logistics and other vital aspects of service. Heartrate while playing the video game are identical to actual battlefield conditions. Today's learning opportunities are far more similar to surgical or aeronautical simulations and are often tailored to the individual.

Our rural schools face increasing poverty among our students as a result of rural economic decline. Broadband access can increase learning opportunities and overcome the challenges of increased numbers of English Language Learners and student mobility. This is vitally important, given the current state of rural education in New York State. Our state leaders have failed to recognize the crisis in rural education, due to the high rate of student graduation when compared to urban school districts. It's true that our students almost all graduate. However, it's also true that most of them never complete even a two year post-secondary education. Three fourths of them are unable to succeed at a course of study at their local community college.

One of New York State's most important innovations historically was a geographically diversified system of post-secondary colleges. Few New Yorkers live more than 30 miles from either a SUNY four or two year institution of higher learning. But we are not equipping rural students to succeed there through our failure to provide sufficient resources to provide a broad enough curriculum to compete. Rural students spend so much time in remediation or in obtaining the preliminary knowledge required to adequately participate in college level classwork that they often fall behind, incur too much debt and ultimately drop out. Broadband is changing that in rural areas where it is offered. Higher level coursework can be provided digitally in locations where either distance or financial resources prevent it being provided in person. It works in other states, but our state continues to maintain regulatory and legal barriers to its expansion.

These barriers would likely fall away if broadband were accessible. With several high profile federal and state initiatives, one would presume this issue would be behind us. The federal E Rate program has provided billions in cell phone surcharge revenue toward rural connectivity. In New York State our own \$2 billion Smart Schools Technology Bond Act should by now have provided the infrastructure needed to bring broadband service throughout all of our communities. Neither has lived up to expectations, falling behind on the distribution of funds. But even where funds have been distributed it has addressed the need largely in school buildings

themselves and not in student homes. This is the result of private industry failing to enter the arena. Rural sparcity simply never provided the economic incentive to invest in broadband infrastructure. E Rate has been a help, but its nationwide application spreads it too thin to be of real assistance (and federal leaders have now proposed expanding its use to health care providers, making it even less accessible for educational purposes.) The Smart Schools Bond Act should have provided \$2 billion worth of practical assistance, but years after statewide voter approval, less than half of the money has gone out the door.

For years there has been a tremendous gap between the internet access available to urban and suburban students and their rural counterparts. Even when a rural community is fortunate enough to have quality internet access in its “community hubs” like our schools, town offices or emergency services, getting it out to the homes of our students has been a struggle. The standard explanation has typically been that there simply isn’t enough population density to warrant the investment by major carriers. As a result, most areas have simply gone without, trying instead to have their students stay after school to get internet based homework done.

That has recently changed on a national level and yet, once again our state has set up roadblocks.

When the Rural Schools Association learned that T-Mobile and Sprint were seeking to merge, with the intent to build broadband access to rural areas, we investigated. We needed to be convinced that allowing the merger of these two mega-carriers would have substantial benefits for rural education. Fortunately, we were. The business model that they have submitted to the Federal Communications Commission and Congress is well thought out and resourced, combining the strengths of each company with the specific priority of addressing rural broadband access.

Combining T Mobile and Sprint has the potential to get affordable broadband access into rural communities much more quickly. The real question has been whether the newly formed company would follow through with universal accessibility and (just as important) affordability. After reviewing verifiable and enforceable contractual provisions, this merger appears to be our best hope of getting real access in a timeframe that will actually help our students and the communities that support them (as well as to promote the economic expansion that is the ultimate salvation of our rural communities.)

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has received verifiable and enforceable commitments from T Mobile and Sprint that map out exactly what they will deliver, including the construction of a “world leading 5G network where rural Americans receive robust 5G broadband service.” As a result, the FCC has announced its support. Here in New York, however, the state’s Attorney General continues to oppose this effort. I don’t purport to be an expert on the litigation or on the merger of these two companies. I fully understand that such a merger raises questions. How universal will coverage be? How affordable will service be to this increasingly financially challenged demographic of our residents? What is the societal risk in creating such a tele communications giant?

Yet, the economic statistics in rural New York are undeniable. 17 million in agricultural production has dwindled to just 7 million. The tremendous population loss will create the loss of per capita federal funding once the 2020 U.S. Census is complete. Combined with our state's reliance on the property tax and comparatively high tax and debt rates, we have created a downward spiral of economic prospects for rural New York State that will be difficult to overcome. That in no way absolves us of our constitutional responsibility of providing our students with the educational tools they need to build a bright future, or the moral imperative of the Family of New York rescuing our rural neighbors in the same way in which we rescued our New York City brothers and sisters in the 1970s.

Having served as Local Government and Home Rule Counsel to this legislature for 7 years, I would suggest that we are in desperate need of a public private partnership and a commission to coordinate the work of creating a pathway to prosperity for our rural residents. We must collaborate with private providers and experts and allocate our own public resources toward bringing our rural areas into a competitive position; in much the way we provided electricity and phone service in previous generations. The speed in which we engage in this effort will determine our economic viability in relation to our sister states. Just as importantly, it will allow an entire segment of our state's residents to regain their dignity and live their lives in a manner expected by all in our Empire State.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on such a seminal issue.

Respectfully submitted,

DAVID A. LITTLE, Esq.