

**Public Education in Northern New York
An Environmental Scan of Current Issues
and the Role of Higher Education**

by
James C. Shuman, Ed.D.
Chair, Department of Education
St. Lawrence University

Status of Public Schools in Northern New York

Northern New York's schools present a dichotomy. Located in a part of the state that is challenged economically, environmentally, and climatically, they struggle to provide an education for the region's inhabitants that meets both the state's standards for achievement as well as the societal needs of the local communities. While northern New York lacks many of the financial and human resources to make it a flourishing part of the state, it features its own distinctive natural resources, attractiveness, and charm. Even though the population density of St. Lawrence County is the lowest in the state, the educators who operate the county's public schools are well-qualified, and they are genuinely dedicated to serving the region's population. Interestingly, even though the county's schools are separated by miles and miles, the people who work in them, and those who work in the region's institutions of higher education as well, know and respect one another deeply, and they collaborate exceptionally well on issues that impact the region. One can honestly say that northern New York has a surprising number of human and institutional resources available for solving complex educational problems effectively, perhaps even more than other regions of the state that are more highly populated.

As with other rural counties in New York, the predominant industries in St. Lawrence County are agriculture, lumber, and mining; and each of these industries is challenged to maintain its viability. Headlines of mine closings and mill closings are becoming increasingly common in the region as these industries struggle with the current economic conditions in the country. The presence of the St. Lawrence River provides a measure of relief on this gloomy economic front, not only through tourism but also through industrial income from smelters and energy production. And the presence of four separate institutions of higher education makes an additional contribution. Still, the economic support for St. Lawrence County's schools is generally weak. The county's schools rank in the lower half of the state's schools in terms of per-pupil expenditure, averaging less than \$8500 per pupil per year in total expenditures. By comparison, the state average per-pupil expenditure is approximately \$10,000, and schools in more affluent counties average over \$15,000 per pupil per year (NYSED Statistical Profiles, 1999). Using a formula that

integrates economic conditions, tax-base, and pupil performance on standardized assessment, the New York State Education Department has identified 17 of the 18 public school districts in St. Lawrence County as “high need,” meaning significant academic needs in relation to resource capacity. While this designation does not single out any of St. Lawrence County’s schools as seriously endangered academically, it underscores the plight that the county’s schools face. Essentially, the designation can also be seen as a predictor for the region’s future – a continuation of its economic challenges without much hope of major change over the years.

Not surprisingly, the county’s schools do not fare particularly well on standardized assessments mandated annually by the Regents. Essentially all of the districts have students on both sides of the state’s median scores for reading and mathematics at the 4th grade and 8th grade levels, and they have all identified specific needs for improved instruction in reading and mathematics in the lower and middle grades. At the commencement level, approximately 55% of all students graduate with a Regents diploma, having passed the Regents examinations for academic subjects (English, social studies, mathematics, science(s), and foreign language), while the percentage of students statewide is only 43%. Almost all of the remaining students complete the graduation requirements for vocational education and/or general education, again at a higher percentage than the state average. Thus, the dichotomy continues to be seen – the region’s schools are hard-pressed economically and they are considered to be high-need in terms of resource capacity, yet they do above average work in preparing students to meet the state’s standards. Interestingly, while student achievement in mathematics and science is considerably lower than in other academic subjects, many graduating students express interest in these subjects on college applications (NYSED Statistical Profiles, 1999; ACE data, 2000).

Demographics of Retirement for School Personnel

Another troubling aspect of the situation in the public schools involves the demographics of retirement. For example, according to a recent 1998 “Snapshot of the Superintendency,” 53% of all school superintendents in NY are expected to retire by 2003, and 62% by 2004 (NY Council of School Superintendents, 1998). These alarming trends are mirrored by anticipated retirements in other sectors of education, including teachers, school guidance counselors, and all types of school administrators (e.g., principals, business officers, special education coordinators, and/or athletic directors). Here in St. Lawrence County, 12 of 18 school district superintendents are within 5 years of retirement age, with parallel demographic trends appearing among teachers and other school administrators (St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES, 2001).

The problem of demographics in the New York's North Country is exacerbated by its remoteness. Very few freshly-minted teachers (or administrators) would look toward northern New York as a place to begin a career in education, unless they had some familiarity with the region in the first place. BOCES planners here in Northern New York, as well as other rural parts of the state, urge school districts to adopt a "grow your own" strategy to identify and train new teachers, and to recruit prospective administrators from the ranks of current teaching professionals in the region. We cannot expect the emerging gap created by retirements among educational personnel to be filled adequately by individuals from other parts of the state or the nation.

Regents Regulations and Institutions of Higher Education

Yet another challenge to the public schools has come from the New York State Board of Regents. Following publication of new learning standards for the state's school children in 1996, the Regents published new standards for teacher certification to take effect in February, 2004. They mandated sweeping changes for all of the state's public and private institutions of higher education (IHE's) that prepare teachers. The mandates extend to school districts as well. For example, in preparing new teachers, IHE's were required to add more courses in education, incorporate additional field experiences (pre-student teaching) into the curricula, reduce faculty teaching loads, revise student teaching expectations, and eventually achieve national accreditation in teacher education by December, 2004. While these new standards can be seen as valuable additions to teacher education programs, they also put new burdens on IHE's and public schools alike. IHE's have already been forced to alter their curricula by September, 2001, in order to assure that graduates can meet the state's new certification standards by February, 2004.

Another new Regents mandate is that all new teachers receive mentoring by school districts throughout their first year of teaching. Because the state also requires new teachers to complete a masters degree within 3 years after initial certification at the baccalaureate level, IHE's can include this mentored experience as a part of a M.Ed. curriculum. St. Lawrence University has positioned itself to do this. However, the challenges for the new teachers are obvious – they must do graduate work at the same time they are getting on their feet as teachers, and they must pay the tuition for the graduate coursework at the same time they are paying off their college loans.

A third new Regents mandate is that all certified teachers must complete at least 175 clock hours of professional development every 5 years throughout their careers. This professional development must align with a "Professional Development Plan" developed by the teacher in concert with the school district's needs. While some of these hours are absorbed in school districts' "professional

development days” (i.e., in-service days), the remainder can be completed through graduate coursework. Research shows that an ideal model for this kind of professional development would be “action research,” which involves the teacher in a combination of lecture/discussion instruction at the University with classroom-based research in the school setting. Again, St. Lawrence University has positioned itself to provide this type of coursework. In some cases, it can be generic, allowing teachers from different school districts to enroll in the same course. In other cases, the coursework could be arranged specifically with a single school district according to its own needs, and delivered either on campus, on location, or on-line.

Now that the new standards are in place for teachers, the Board of Regents is investigating new standards for school administrators. In October, 2001, they published a generalized knowledge base upon which the new standards for certification in school administration will be based. When the new standards are published (most likely in 2002), the state will then establish new regulations for IHE’s that prepare school administrators, repeating the cycle it followed with teacher certification and subsequent regulation of teacher preparation. Thus, all IHE’s that prepare school administrators can expect to alter their curricula within the next 2-3 years. It is safe to predict that enhanced standards for “Pupil Personnel Services” (i.e., guidance counselors and special education personnel) will follow shortly thereafter.

Higher Education’s Role in Professional Development in North Country Schools

The relationship between institutions of higher education (IHE’s) and the public schools is complex and multi-faceted. Viewed from the broadest perspective, it can be seen as synergistic: IHE’s produce teachers, who teach the students who attend IHE’s. Better prepared teachers produce higher quality incoming college students. In this sense, teacher preparation can be seen as a contributing factor to college-level achievement of students, not to mention improved quality of prospective college students in the admissions process. Clearly, teaching should be valued as a significant part of the educational enterprise, both in colleges and in public schools, and teacher preparation is central to it. In addition to this broad perspective, the relationship is also evidenced through the specific programs of instruction available through the region’s colleges and universities. These can be sub-divided into programs for prospective teachers, for new and practicing teachers, for prospective school administrators, and for new and practicing administrators.

Several universities in New York’s North Country provide programs in education that contribute directly to the workforce of the public schools. St. Lawrence University has undergraduate and graduate-level teacher preparation programs

as well as graduate programs in educational administration and school counseling (guidance). They are described below. The SUNY system includes 4-year undergraduate and 2-year graduate programs at Potsdam, Plattsburgh, and Oswego; they include programs in teaching, special education, reading, and various specialist services (e.g., school library, speech pathology, audiology, and the like). The SUNY system also includes 2-year colleges at Canton, Watertown, Plattsburgh, and Saranac Lake, all of which provide basic training in the liberal arts for students intending to continue at 4-year institutions in the field of education. Finally, other private institutions of higher education include Paul Smiths College and Clarkson University; while neither of these provide any specific programs in education, both collaborate with public schools in a variety of ways.

Programs for prospective teachers at St. Lawrence University. Teacher Education at St. Lawrence University is available at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Undergraduates can complete the requirements for initial teaching certification by majoring in the subject of the certificate and completing the education minor (certification option), a series of 8 courses taken throughout the last three years of college. St. Lawrence also offers a program of study leading to initial teaching certification on the graduate level. Because some undergraduates complete only one half of the coursework in education as undergraduates, St. Lawrence also offers a way of bridging undergraduate and graduate study for certification via the Post-Baccalaureate Certification Program. Basically, that program is a “ninth semester” in which students complete student teaching after graduating with a bachelor’s degree.

St. Lawrence University provides several optional ways for students preparing for initial teaching certification to meet the new Regents mandates for field experience prior to student teaching. Students can work in the University’s Reading Tutor and Math Tutor Programs, designed specifically to assist school districts in addressing problems in reading and math achievement in the elementary and middle grades. They can also work as interns in individual classrooms of designated school districts, observing and helping out as a way to meet the requirements of some of their coursework in education. Finally, a few select students are identified as “Teacher-Scholars” in an innovative program currently funded by an external grant. The Teacher-Scholars are high-achieving undergraduate math and science majors who have expressed interest in math or science education. They are paired with a faculty mentor in their major department at the University and with a secondary math or science teacher in the schools. This program is in its first year in 2001-2002, and it already shows great promise in bringing some of the University’s top students into the fields of mathematics and science teaching. Because it is externally funded for only two years, St. Lawrence must find a way to support it internally if it is to be continued.

That this program be continued is highly desirable because St. Lawrence University is ideally poised to develop further its strength in math and science teacher education. Partly because of our location in a particularly impressive region of the state in terms of natural resources and outdoor activity, our math and science departments are among our strongest. For example, St. Lawrence University ranks 31st among the nation's liberal arts colleges in the number of Ph.D.'s in natural science and mathematics earned by alumni in the last ten years, and we rank 5th among all colleges and universities in America in the percentage of our alumni who earned a Ph.D. in one of the earth sciences in the last ten years. Prospective students, especially those from local schools, indicate exceptional interest in math and science. And we have excellent relations with the public schools to develop collaborative field-based programs in math and science education.

Programs for New and Practicing Teachers. Because a master's degree is required for professional (continuing) teaching certification in New York, new teachers who hold an initial certificate must continue their education on the graduate level. St. Lawrence University offers a M.Ed. program in General Studies in Education, suitable for teachers holding any certification for teaching on the secondary level in New York. (SUNY Potsdam offers M.Ed. programs for teachers holding elementary certification.) By state mandate, the 36-semester-hour master's degree must be completed within three years of initial certification.

Because new teachers must also complete a year of mentored teaching in the school district, the University offers new teachers a way to achieve 6 semester hours of graduate credit toward the M.Ed. for this work through EDUC 595 (Mentored Internship), a two-semester, 6-semester hour course in its M. Ed. program in General Studies in Education. Details of the mentored internship course have been arranged with Dr. Prue Posner, Director of Professional Development for the St. Lawrence County BOCES, who coordinates a two-year program of mentoring and instruction for new hires in the county.

Because all professionally certified teachers must complete 175 clock hours of professional development every 5 years by Regents mandate, St. Lawrence University has positioned itself to offer graduate-level coursework to help them meet this requirement. Courses in curriculum development, cognitive science and learning theory, technology applications, subject matter studies, and pedagogical content studies will provide a variety of opportunities to practicing teachers. Most of these courses are planned to utilize action research modalities, in order to maximize teachers' applications of the knowledge they learn.

The biggest problem the new and practicing teachers face is the cost of graduate-level tuition. As a private institution, St. Lawrence University must charge significantly higher fees than the SUNY (state) institutions. Currently,

tuition for a 3-semester-hour graduate course at St. Lawrence is \$1545, compared to \$639 for a 3-semester-hour graduate course at any of the SUNY institutions. Clearly, tuition assistance would help new and practicing teachers take advantage of the high quality education offered at St. Lawrence University, allowing them to avoid compromising their education for the sake of lower costs.

Programs for Prospective School Administrators. Because administrative certification currently requires three years of prior experience as a public school teacher, the only source of prospective school leaders is the teaching profession. The Board of Regents is considering alternatives to this situation, especially since the need for new school administrators is so acute in the coming years. That said, making the move from teaching into school leadership is a complex undertaking for three significant reasons. First, a teacher must complete 18 semester hours of graduate study in educational administration, having already completed a 36-semester-hour M. Ed. degree for professional teaching certification. This is expensive and time-consuming, especially for a mid-career teacher who may have family responsibilities or other commitments as well. Second, the teacher must complete a 1-semester, 6-semester-hour internship. This often necessitates taking an unpaid leave of absence from the teaching position, imposing a financial hardship. Third, the newly certified administrator faces the possibility of moving to another community, as well as undertaking a job that has multiple requirements and obligations. While the salaries for school administrators are generally higher than salaries for teachers, so are the responsibilities, the hours required for the job, and the headaches. Going into school administration is not an easy choice, even though it presents the opportunity to have a far greater impact in the field of education. Given the demographics of retirement, the schools in northern New York face significant problems in “growing their own” new administrators.

It is worth noting that St. Lawrence University is the only IHE in the four-county region of northern New York (Franklin, St. Lawrence, Jefferson and Lewis Counties) that prepares school administrators. The nearest other programs are in Oswego and Plattsburgh, both of which are approximately 120 miles away from Canton. While distance learning programs can help prospective school administrators to achieve some of their graduate-level coursework, no other programs are as readily or as easily available as those at St. Lawrence. The University offers a 36-semester-hour M.Ed. in school administration as well as a 24-semester-hour Certificate of Advanced Study (C.A.S). The programs are serviceable for the time being, while we await publication of the Regents’ new standards for school administrators.

St. Lawrence University has been working recently with local school districts and with the St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES to design paid internships and other alternatives to help reduce the costs that prospective school administrators face

in their certification programs. Clearly, the financial issue is a primary one for these graduate students, and it is difficult to solve in the present economic climate, where school districts are strapped for income due to the downturn of the economy both before and after September 11. One intriguing option would be for St. Lawrence to establish a "Teaching Fellowship" at the University on an annual basis. The fellow would be a prospective school administrator who would take a one-year leave from her/his teaching position in the public schools to join the University as a paid faculty member. During the year, the fellow would teach courses in education at St. Lawrence University while completing the graduate coursework in educational administration for certification as a school leader. At the same time, the fellow's teaching position in the public school could be filled by a recent St. Lawrence University teacher preparation graduate in a quid pro quo or, of course, by any other candidate the school chooses. Currently, the county's school districts would be hard pressed to provide financial assistance to a Teaching Fellow, yet this could eventually become a possibility in a stronger economic climate.

Programs for new and practicing administrators. In addition to the C. A. S. program offered to practicing administrators in the region, St. Lawrence University has been involved recently with Clarkson University in the development of the Educational Leadership Academy of Northern New York (ELANNY). This collaborative academy will eventually undertake research and provide professional development programs, both for prospective educational leaders and for practicing school administrators. The collaboration provides a noteworthy opportunity – joining the forces of Clarkson's Business School with St. Lawrence University's Graduate Program in Educational Administration. Clearly, as we enter this new century, it is important to bring fresh ideas and different perspectives to bear on the problems of school leadership in northern New York, and we believe that this collaboration holds considerable promise. While ELANNY is only in its initial planning stages, funded to this point by the presidents of St. Lawrence and Clarkson through discretionary funds, we hope to develop programs not only for school administrators, but also for school business officers, for school boards, and for college-level administrators, not only in northern New York but eventually in Ontario as well.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper provides background information for an on-going dialogue about education in New York's North Country. It paints a picture of the region's schools as economically challenged and geographically isolated yet remarkably collaborative and successful. It also paints a picture of university-school involvement that is highly constrained through Regents mandates yet carefully

and thoughtfully conceived by university faculty and school-based personnel. The following recommendations emerge:

1. There is great need for tuition assistance for graduate students of education at St. Lawrence University. This is especially acute for new teachers in mentoring programs and for prospective school administrators in internships.
2. A Teaching Fellowship can provide a solution to several of the region's needs at one time: a way to lessen financial hardship for a prospective administrator, a way for the region to "grow one of its own" administrators, and a way for the University to bring a qualified instructor to some of its graduate courses.
3. Collaboration between St. Lawrence University and the region's schools, the University's strength in undergraduate science and mathematics education, and the county's location, provide an ideal opportunity to develop a strong science/math education program for prospective and practicing teachers.
4. There is great need for an annual symposium in which school educators can reflect on their situation and on their progress in achieving educational results. Such a symposium could be held at St. Lawrence University in a "retreat" mode, providing guided opportunities for teachers and school administrators to hear new ideas, discuss their own progress, and dream about new approaches to educational problems.

It is hoped that these recommendations can find their way to the forefront of dialogue in the coming weeks and months.