

## **Amid the pandemic, BOCES is there when we need it the most**

By Charles S. Dedrick and Robert S. Schneider

Over the past year, New York's public schools have been called upon to meet unprecedented challenges. They made an abrupt shift to remote learning, opened the school year during a pandemic this fall, and have offered learning models that were previously unthinkable. Schools have been more involved in providing student meals, childcare, and technology than ever before.

The shape of public education today, as the pandemic continues, would have been unrecognizable a year ago. The efforts of teachers and school professionals across New York and beyond continue to be heroic. Our school districts have done a tremendous job.

But there are some other unsung heroes that need to be recognized: The policymakers that more than 70 years ago had the foresight to build a shared service model into the fabric of our public education system in the form of BOCES – and the people who deliver these services to our students and communities every day.

Just a little background: the BOCES, or Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, model was established in 1948 as a way for school districts to work together and provide services that would be difficult and more expensive for them to offer on their own. This has grown to 37 BOCES across the state that provide hundreds of programs and services, from career and technical education to health and safety services to support in areas such as computer networks, human resources and teacher training.

During the pandemic, our state has perhaps needed BOCES more than ever. And BOCES has been there.

When schools needed to mobilize to efficiently get laptop devices to students and Internet connectivity to families in need, BOCES was there. According to BOCES of New York State, BOCES were involved in the procurement of more than 172,000 computers, tablets and laptops for students across the state this past year.

As our state dealt with the worst public health crisis in a century, BOCES was there. Approximately 650 BOCES staff members were trained to help area emergency response teams with things like contact tracing, call centers, testing and triage.

When schools needed to train teachers in distance learning, BOCES was there. As schools moved forward with reopening plans last fall, BOCES provided 5,800-plus professional development opportunities, again according to BOCES of New York State.

While very little has been perfect in society this past year, the fact is that every day, New York's students are learning, connected with their teachers and classmates, and accessing school meals and other critical services. BOCES is a major part of this.

In normal times, public schools across the state routinely turn to BOCES when they need solutions. This cooperative, service-driven spirit has carried on through the pandemic.

Consider the Broome-Tioga BOCES staff members who used their career and technical school's 3D printers to produce facemasks and shields for healthcare workers, the group of nurses from Monroe One BOCES who assisted with contact tracing, and the Capital Region BOCES Shared Food Service employees who arranged meal delivery for students without transportation. The list goes on.

The COVID-19 crisis has reinforced the adage that we're all in this together. BOCES has been putting this into practice for more than seven decades, and in the last year has demonstrated why we are so fortunate to have this model in New York.

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