§ 1202. Legislative findings and intent. The legislature hereby finds, determines and declares that:

1. Rural education is a critical factor and dominant force in stimulating and maintaining socioeconomic development, economic viability, social activity and cultural enrichment in rural regions of New York state. Rural schools fill an integral role as centers of the community and as a bridge for youth to connect with the broader society in fulfilling their dreams and ambitions;

2. Rural areas account for more than half of the school systems, boards of cooperative education services and colleges in the state;

3. Rural areas have unique conditions and circumstances which require special consideration in the development and assessment of state policy, including: (a) that rural areas contain many of the low-wealth, low-spending school districts in the state; (b) that average incomes of rural residents are lower than statewide norms; and (c) that per pupil expenditures in rural schools are more than fifteen percent below the statewide average;

4. Weaknesses exist in rural education inasmuch as rural schools have difficulty attracting and retaining highly trained teachers and administrators, teachers are spread thinly over several subject areas;

5. A limited knowledge base on small rural educational organizations and lack of a systematic research agenda for rural schools limit the potential for development of cohesive state policy for educational services in rural New York;

6. The establishment of a program on rural education would enhance the capacity of policy makers within state government: (a) to better understand the inefficiencies and needs of the state's rural education systems; (b) to assess the impact of existing and proposed government mandates on rural areas; (c) to promote innovation, flexibility and investment to ensure that rural residents have equitable access to and receive quality educational services and opportunities; and (d) to

promote the long-term goal of improving the economic and social well-being of rural communities as a direct result of improving rural school performance.