

LoHud – WPSBA Community View: Local Schools Shortchanged by NYS

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The National School Walkout of March 14th set the stage for a new chapter in our nation's history as students have taken the lead in demanding protection from gun violence in their schools. Against this backdrop, the Governor and state legislators are now negotiating state funding levels for public schools in the 2018-19 NY State Budget.

With a renewed focus on school safety, the call for adequate state support of public education is as urgent as ever. School officials struggle to allocate scarce resources to introduce additional safety measures, provide essential mental health services through qualified counselors and psychologists, ensure proper training for educators on social and emotional needs, and take all steps required for a positive school climate.

These important initiatives must not occur at the expense of other critical goals. A strain on school budgets leading to staff reductions, increased class size, and loss of programs would be unacceptable to our communities. Our local public schools provide the best possible array and quality of educational programs, serve the needs of diverse learners, and enhance the core curriculum through programs in arts, music, theater and athletics, all resulting in a well-rounded educational experience. These varied and interdependent educational goals should not have to compete with one another.

It is time to demand proper levels of state aid to our public schools. Throughout years of underfunding, local taxpayers have shouldered more than their fair share of the burden. In this school year, taxpayers in Westchester and Putnam are funding their local school budgets at a rate of 85% (median), whereas taxpayers statewide fund theirs at 50% (median), with most of the balance covered by state aid.

We must also recognize and address the financial needs of Special Act School Districts.

Dozens of items in the Governor's proposed budget are being negotiated. Those of particular importance to districts in our area are:

Foundation aid:

We must demand a sufficient increase in this general operating aid for schools. The New York State Educational Conference Board, representing leading educational organizations, estimates that \$1.5 billion in additional state aid is required to continue current programs. The governor has proposed less than 25 percent of this amount, the Senate, just under 50 percent, and the Assembly, 80 percent.

Under the governor's proposal, over 75 percent of Westchester and Putnam schools would each receive a meager 0.25 percent increase from this year's Foundation Aid. Our median amount of aid per pupil would be \$1,598 versus the median statewide per pupil amount of \$7,063.

Expense based aid:

State reimbursement of certain expenses is an important source of school revenue. The governor's proposal introduces reimbursement caps for several expenses - transportation, building aid and BOCES - and shifts other significant costs to local districts. For example, proposed reimbursement calculations for mandated summer special education programs would increase costs by an estimated \$70 million statewide, according to the New York State Council of Superintendents.

Regional Cost Index:

A region's cost of living is an important factor in determining state funding levels. Although Westchester and Putnam's cost of living is similar to that of New York City and Long Island, this is not reflected in our state aid funding formula, which groups us with the Mid-Hudson region reaching as far north as Sullivan and Ulster Counties. Being grouped with NYC/Long Island would add 8.4% to our regional cost factor, translating into hundreds of thousands or millions of additional dollars in aid, depending on the district.

Unfunded or Underfunded Mandates:

The tax levy cap legislation was introduced with a promise to eliminate unsound, unduly burdensome state mandates that create unnecessary

local expenditures beyond a school district's control. There has been no mandate relief. These annually increasing local expenditures, combined with significant shortfalls in state aid to public schools, create an unreasonable burden that will fall on the local taxpayer, result in the loss of school programs, and/or curtail critical improvements that are responsive to current needs.

Public education is an investment in our future. We must work together to safeguard the fiscal health of our schools and ensure that children are educated in safe nurturing learning environments that provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to become informed, productive, and actively engaged citizens.