

School budget vote: What's driving increased school costs?

Local school officials say unfunded mandates from the state are part of the reason New York voters are asked to pony up every election cycle

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On Tuesday, voters across Monroe County will have the opportunity to weigh in on nearly \$1.8 billion in spending spread among the 19 suburban school districts that educate local kids.

When there's no question that school spending is the biggest driver of property taxation in New York state — where residents have the dubious distinction of being among the highest taxed in the nation — school budget season is the time to drill down for some answers from local officials about why they come back to voters year after year asking for more.

But first, it's helpful to consider all that we ask school districts to do, because it's not just about gathering kids into a classroom and teaching them reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic.

There are school buildings to heat, light, water, maintain and equip. Athletic fields that need attention, lawns to be cut, information technology systems to install and keep up to date. There are books to be bought, copiers that need paper, chalkboards that need chalk. Phone systems and surveillance systems. Security guards. There's art and science rooms to supply, pools to maintain, vocational training centers and restaurant-style kitchens to outfit. And the list of basic infrastructure needs goes on.

Then, getting the county's nearly 80,000 schoolchildren to their respective schools requires fleets of buses, mechanics, bus drivers, bus aides and crossing guards. Feeding them requires cafeteria workers. There are classroom teachers and aides, nurses and coaches, special education teachers and more aides, equipment for students who need accommodations, administrators to manage the workforce and lawyers to handle the legal issues.

I chatted last week with Romeo Colilli, assistant superintendent for finance and administrative services in the Greece Central School district about some of the

Colilli pointed out that there are significant costs districts incur that don't have any direct correlation to a slight drop in student enrollment. Those include increases in the cost of employee health care that far outstrip inflation, costs for utilities, payments for employee pensions. Many of these costs, he said, went up more than 20 percent over the past year.

Additionally, increasing numbers of students are classified as needing costly special education services. As well, the district is seeing an uptick in the number of students who are not native English speakers, and who require additional supports to catch up to speed.

And all of that means more staff, with their attached costs for health care, pensions and other benefits.

Additionally, even when enrollment comes down, it doesn't often do so in a way that makes it possible to make significant adjustments to staffing, Colilli said. The losses are spread across multiple buildings and grade levels. Losing two kids in a single sixth-grade class, or even 20 10th graders across four high school buildings, doesn't make costs come down.

"We have transitioned to enrollment-based staffing, and have found some economies but you really max those out over time," he said.

What's this about more special education students, how does that affect spending?

While Greece hasn't seen a huge increase in the number of special education students, the needs of that population have been on the upswing, Colilli said. That has meant adding more classes where there is one teacher and one aide for every six or eight students. In some cases, the addition of one special needs student in a single building can require hiring one more teacher and an additional aide so the district doesn't violate state mandates on special needs classroom ratios.

And students with exceptionally significant needs can add exceptionally significant costs: some out-of-district placements for these students can top \$150,000 per year.

"When you have five or six of those students that's nearly a million dollars right there," said Colilli.

factors driving school costs, how districts have been affected by the state's tax levy cap and what the future holds given those constraints. Colilli was only speaking of his district, but issues and trends facing the others are similar. Here are some of the topics we touched on:

If school enrollment has been falling, why are school costs still rising?

Across the state, school enrollment has fallen by about 8% over the last decade, with larger concentrations of falloff in upstate rural counties. Greece, like other districts in Monroe County, has been part of this trend. Meanwhile, it seems like every year, districts propose budgets that push right up against the state-mandated tax cap — some even seek to exceed it, like Brighton is doing this year.

for the entire student population.

Has transportation been a factor?

It has, in a couple of ways, Colilli said.

First, the county and perhaps the state, is suffering from a significant shortage of qualified bus drivers. That may be driven, in part, by low unemployment rates making the part-time bus driver positions less attractive — a qualified person with a commercial drivers' license can make significantly more money working elsewhere.

As a result, Greece has had to hire an outside contractor to handle some of its busing needs. That led to about \$2.5 million in additional costs.

There's also a couple of other issues districts face regarding transportation, he said.

An increase in the number of parents placing their students in private and charter schools translates into more bus runs and routes, as public schools must transport those kids.

As well, public schools in New York are required to provide transportation for students deemed homeless, even if they are staying a significant distance away.

Those are unfunded mandates aren't they? What about other unfunded mandates?

Plus, there's a greater focus on meeting the social and emotional needs of all students, so that has meant greater resources expended on counseling and other support services

districts with the requirement that they provide a "sound basic education."

But the formula hasn't been updated, and continues to use outdated Census information and inaccurately assesses community wealth, poverty and other needs, say school officials. That's led to districts getting less state aid than they need over the past decade. Then, the state instituted a clawback scheme following the Great Recession that took back some of each district's annual aid, and compounded the issue by freezing Foundation Aid for three consecutive years beginning in 2009.

To date, schools still aren't getting the funding they were promised back in 2007 when the state instituted the new formula.

All told, Colilli said, those moves resulted in Greece receiving about \$300 million less in state aid than it should have over the past 10 years. That's enough money to run the entire district for about a year and a half.

Other districts are in a similar position, and the issue is acute in Brighton this year, where the proposed budget calls for exceeding the tax levy cap.

This year alone, Brighton leaders say the district is being shorted by the state to the tune of about \$8 million.

There, officials say, the alternative to busting the tax cap would be cutting staff and programs, including

The state's minimum wage changes are an unfunded mandate, requirements that schools provide feminine hygiene products are unfunded mandates, a law against so-called "lunch shaming" is an unfunded mandate. There are a plethora of others, too.

The state School Boards Association notes there are at least 94 different state and federal unfunded mandates covering special education services, transportation, academic intervention services, health and safety and building and grounds.

One study shows those costs account for about 17% to 20% of school district budget spending.

But you get state aid, don't you?

Most districts in 2019-20 are expected to get more state aid than the year before, but school officials say the way the state allocates that assistance, called Foundation Aid, is deeply flawed. First put in place in 2007, the Foundation Aid formula was supposed to help the state balance the needs of its school

earlygrade foreign language and music instruction.

Colilli said Greece is big enough to be able to weather the funding storm a little longer before it needs to eye lopping off programs.

"The tax cap is 2 percent and I've got salary increases of 3.5 percent and health care going up 8 to 10 percent and retirement costs between 10 and 15 percent of payroll," he said. "When you budget, you try to go through and minimize as much as you can so you're not impacting residents as much, but then some of your costs have gone up more than 20 percent a year, so at some point there's no way to cut more without cutting a ton of expenditures that impact kids or getting more revenue from the state."

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