

Cutting school administrators won't fix budgets



Written by

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If the **salary** of every school administrator in Monroe County's suburban schools was eliminated today, the savings would still be less than the cut in state aid facing the schools next year.

Under the state budget passed in April, the county's suburban schools will receive about \$55 million less in aid next year — after factoring in the one-shot federal aid administered last year by the state — while the cost for all administrator **salaries** is about \$52 million.

Administrator salaries have been one of the points of contention in budget debates at the state and local levels.

Through state Freedom of Information Laws, the *Democrat and Chronicle* obtained the names, titles and salaries for all school administrators in Monroe County's suburban districts, as well as in the Canandaigua and Victor schools in Ontario County.

The data show there are roughly 527 administrators and 14,471 other employees in Monroe County districts, and 38 administrators and 1,226 other employees in the Canandaigua and Victor districts. The administrator salaries **account** for about 4 percent of the \$1.5 billion spent annually here on those districts' schools.

In districts throughout New York, voters will head to the polls on Tuesday to cast ballots on school budgets, spending propositions and school board members. Rochester School District residents — and those in the other "Big Five" city school districts in the state — do not vote on their budgets.

The budgets up for consideration reflect the tough economic times: In almost every district, there will be job cuts, and in many others there will also be cuts to sports and academic programs.

Still — and largely due to diminished state aid — Monroe County suburban voters are being asked to approve average property

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tax increases of 1.8 percent. Statewide, voters are being asked to approve budgets that would increase school taxes by an average of 3.4 percent.

While Gov. Andrew Cuomo and other lawmakers have drawn attention to administrators' salaries as a category where schools should trim their costs, school leaders say the real savings would come from state action to eliminate burdensome unfunded mandates.

Such mandates are estimated to account for as much as 20 percent of school budgets.

There's a perception that school administrations are bloated because teacher unions frequently hammer on administrative costs — "that's their rallying cry, 'Don't cut teachers, cut administrators!'" said Frank Oberg, school board president in the Greece Central School District.

"But we know that our administrator costs are about 3 percent of our total budget, and even if you eliminated it all, you'd still have 97 percent of the budget left to deal with.

"Clamoring about administrative costs is like a magic trick to redirect everybody from focusing on where the real problems are in spending."

Salary data Generally, school districts responded quickly to the Freedom of Information act requests sent in mid-March

for their administrators' salaries and a count of employees by full-time equivalents. All districts sent the data electronically and none charged fees to provide the information.

Including Canandaigua and Victor, districts provided names, titles and salary data for 573 administrators. But they provided varying levels of detail: Some counted only those who are state-certified as school administrators, while others also provided information for employees who work in other management or supervisory positions. The differences made making direct district-to-district staffing comparisons difficult.

However, using the provided numbers, the ratio of teachers, teaching support and non-teaching employees to administrators is roughly one administrator for every 26 other employees. By student enrollment, it breaks down to one administrator for every 164 students.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the list of the top 20 highest-paid administrators is

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dominated by superintendents. Pittsford's Mary Alice Price tops that list. She will be paid \$219,168 for the 2010-11 school year. A close second is Rush-Henrietta's Kenneth Graham, who will be paid \$208,767.

The top earners list is also peppered with assistant and deputy superintendents, as in Hilton where Assistant Superintendent for [Business](#) Steven Ayers is paid \$161,752; and in Spencerport, where Deputy Superintendent Michael S. Crumb is paid \$161,681.

The Greece Central School District does not have a permanent superintendent this year, but has hired Barbara Deane-Williams to take the job for 2011-12. She will be paid \$198,000.

On the lower end of administrator salaries — in those districts that provided data for non-certified managers — are food service directors, head bus drivers and custodial supervisors, whose pay ranges from the mid-\$60,000s to the upper \$30,000s.

Pay cap?

School administrator pay has been a hot political topic this year, since Gov. Andrew Cuomo introduced legislation in February that would cap school superintendents' salaries based on district enrollment. Under that plan, similar to one enacted recently in New Jersey, a school superintendent in the largest districts could earn no more than \$175,000 per year. Those in the smallest districts — with

enrollment of 250 students or less — could earn no more than \$125,000 per year. Others would be paid on a sliding scale in between. "The proposal has no merit to me at all," said Jody Siegle, executive director of the Monroe County School Boards Association.

She noted that a new evaluation system in place for next year ties teacher and principal pay to performance.

"When we're working toward a model for teachers and building leaders that establishes a relationship between how you're paid and what you do, it's moving in the complete opposition direction to just cap the salary of a superintendent."

Cuomo is paid \$179,000 annually. According to the state Council of School Superintendents, the average superintendent salary in the state is \$163,000, compared with \$160,000 nationally.

"I can't say what salary is fair for

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superintendents, the assistants and deputies, but the overall cost of administration is something many want to look at and review," said state Assemblyman Bill Reilich, R-Greece.

He supports the idea of looking at a salary cap proposal. "If the governor of a state with tens of thousands of employees and a \$32.5 billion budget is paid a certain salary and someone managing fewer people and a smaller budget is paid more, how do you justify that higher salary?"

According to the data provided by the local schools, a dozen school administrators here are paid more than the governor.

Six administrators here earn more than \$200,000 and 332 are paid less than \$100,000 per year. The average pay is about \$99,000 and the median, about \$95,000.

Mandate relief

Reilich is also a strong supporter of a proposal this year that would cap the growth of local property taxes, including school taxes, at no more than 2 percent annually.

Cap legislation, which Cuomo has championed, has passed the state Senate, but is hung up in the Assembly. Assembly Democrats could introduce cap legislation soon, but their version of the bill would include an expiration date and exempt some types of spending, such as employee pension contributions.

Maggie Hannon of Greece said as a taxpayer she's also fed up with high taxes, but as a parent with students in the Greece schools, she doesn't want to see a law pass that could ultimately force schools to choose between mandates and classroom programs.

"Everyone is trying to find the answers for balance," said Hannon, who also is co-president of the district's Parent Teacher Student Association.

Hannon added that she'd like to see more employee unions "step up" and offer concessions to help get through tough economic times.

"But a cap isn't going to be the answer people think it is."

Officials say that's especially true if legislators impose a cap and don't provide the mandate relief local governments and schools say is vital for their long-term financial survival.

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A study done by a coalition of downstate school districts, Regional Education Advocacy Districts, estimates that as much as 20 percent of public school budgets goes toward fulfilling requirements from unfunded state and federal mandates.

Those mandates include everything from the more than 200 additional laws requiring special education services that are above and beyond federal requirements, to requirements that public schools provide bus service for private and parochial school students, to requirements that schools have automatic defibrillators available.

"You can't have a tax cap without mandate relief," said Jeff Crane, superintendent of the West Irondequoit Central School District. "The Legislature must help us control the expenses, not just help us control our revenue."

His district's proposed budget for next year would increase spending by 1 percent to \$66.7 million and increase the tax levy by 2 percent. That's despite as many as 14 job cuts and a freeze on administrator salaries.

The story is similar around the county.

Under proposals up for vote Tuesday, Hilton schools have cut sports and extracurricular programs and will have administrators take unpaid furloughs. Webster schools have secured employee wage concessions and will cut more than 58 jobs, including those of two

administrators. Greece also will cut two administrator jobs, as well as 50 other teaching and support staff jobs.

"There's a misunderstanding with the tax cap that troubles me," Siegle said.

"The cap doesn't stop costs from increasing, because costs still increase. And unless the state does something about mandates, those costs are going to keep going up, but the programs and services people want in their communities will be eroded because the money schools do have will have to go toward the state-driven costs."

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