

School spending up amid fewer students

On Tuesday, voters will weigh requests to approve budgets totaling \$1.5 billion for Monroe County districts

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At the same time enrollment in Monroe County's suburban schools has fallen by 5 percent, overall school spending has increased here by nearly 10 percent.

For the 2011-12 school year, voters here approved more than \$1.4 billion in public school spending, while on Tuesday, they will weigh in on requests to OK more than \$1.5 billion in spending, \$860 million of which will come directly from local property taxes.

Education leaders say they strive to keep costs under control, but that a continuing burden of state mandates including Common Core implementation, new teacher evaluation procedures and skyrocketing pension contributions leave districts little leeway when it comes to slashing spending — even in light of falling enrollment.

“What's really been killing us is pension costs, this year is the highest we've seen in 20 years,” said Steven Ayers, assistant superintendent for business in the Hilton Central School District. In the wake of the 2008 recession, the state's Teacher Retirement System pension fund lost nearly a fifth of its overall value. To make that up, school district contributions to the teachers retirement system increased dramatically — from about 6 percent of payroll to more than 16 percent of payroll for the 2014-15 school year. For other non-teaching staff, the state and local employee contribution rate is nearly 21 percent of payroll.

Minor relief from that mandate is in sight, however, Ayers said. “For next year, there's a drop of four percentage points in the contribution rate, and for my district, that's a \$1 million savings in the budget.”

Jody Siegle, executive director of the Monroe County School Boards Associa

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“If we're going to hit the brakes on taxes once and for all, school districts need to do more, and mandate relief from Albany would help.”

TIM HOEFER

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EMPIRE CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY





Greece school board elections are coming up Tuesday, and a proposition asks for 25 new school buses. Despite having fewer students overall, spending by Monroe County school districts is still increasing.

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Spending

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tion, pointed out that no districts in the county are seeking an override this year of the state's tax levy cap. The county average levy increase sought by schools here is 2.4 percent. Statewide, the average spending increase is 1.9 percent and the average levy increase is 1.6 percent.

Just 18 of the state's nearly 700 districts this year plan to ask voters to override the tax limit, which requires a super majority of voters to pass. None of those districts is in Monroe County. Last year, Brighton and West Irondequoit asked voters to do so, and while Brighton voters agreed, West Irondequoit residents did not.

Twice.

Consequently, that district was forced last year to implement a contingency budget with deep cuts. This year's spending proposal there hews to its levy cap, and requests approval for \$68 million in spending, an increase of 2.6 percent over this year.

"Local leadership is responsive to the community and conditions and what their communities want and need," said Siegle. "We really don't need a state law to make people realize that taxes need to be contained."

Nonetheless, she said, mandate relief promised when the state imposed that levy cap starting in the 2012-13 school year has yet to materialize. An 11-member mandate relief council convened with much fanfare by Gov. Andrew Cuomo in 2011 failed to initiate any significant reforms before it shuffled quietly off into the sunset in 2013.

While she had no quantifiable numbers, Siegle said the costs of mandates are significant. Indeed, in 2011, a downstate coalition of public school districts, Mid-Hudson's Regional Education Advocacy Districts, determined at least 20 percent of their district's annual spending was directly attributable to unfunded mandates. The group noted that if that were representative of the entire state, unfunded mandates would account for about \$6 billion of nearly \$30 billion in education spending.

"The costs we have to deal with that state laws make it impossible for us to alter in any way continue to rise at a cost higher than inflation," said Siegle. "In addition, the state in the last few years passed laws for major new mandates which have significantly added to the costs borne by the districts, for example the APPR (teacher evaluation) plans, which have been modified several times and now must be modified again, the change to Common Core, which required all new materials and curriculum and staff development training and then all the costs associated with the assessments."

Ayers said some of those costs also include new infrastructure such as computer systems just to track and handle all the data required for those assessments and teacher evaluation systems.

According to the Empire Center for Public Policy, a nonpartisan think tank based in Albany, local schools are not alone in seeing their spending rise while enrollment is falling. According to the group's analysis, the state's schools are projecting a .6 percent drop in the number of students next year while expecting to spend 2.5 percent more.

Here in Monroe County, districts have seen five-year losses of students ranging from a low of .6 percent in Hilton to a substantial 18 percent in East Rochester, where enrollment has fallen to 1,026 students for the 2015-16 school year.

"The property tax cap is doing a great job of controlling the growth of the burden on local taxpayers, but if we're going to hit the brakes on taxes once and for all, school districts need to do more, and mandate relief from Albany would help," said Tim Hoefler, Empire Center's executive director.

As for why the cost of education doesn't rise and fall in direct proportion to the number of students, Ayers said aside from rising costs associated with benefits, contractual salaries and the mandates, that's because districts don't lose students in ways that necessarily lead to cost savings.

For example, he said, those losses are generally spread out over 13 grades (kindergarten through 12th grade) and unless you lose enough students at a particular grade level, you can't just cut teaching or other staff in response.

"It's often not until you lose several hundred students that you're in a position to make reductions in staffing, and with all that we as districts have been through in the last several years, those staffing reductions have been mixed in and we are all reducing staffing to some degree," he said. "But fewer students doesn't change the cost of a whole lot of things: you're still heating just as many square feet, making the same payments on your borrowing. Your fixed costs are still fixed."

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