

Brighton parents to protest

Say state is shorting schools, forcing cuts

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The Brighton Central School District is warning parents about deep staff and program cuts next year if the state does not address an apparent inequity in its education funding formula.

Those parents plan to rally at 10 a.m. Saturday at Brighton Town Hall at a budget hearing held by Assembly Majority Leader Joseph Morelle, DIrondequoit.

The district faces a \$1.8 million budget gap and would need to raise taxes nearly 5 percent to fill it. That would be complicated by the state property tax cap, which this year essentially mandates a flat budget unless 60 percent of voters approve an override. In a presentation to the school board, the district listed an array of cuts it would need to make to fill the gap through reduced spending: fewer modified sports and extracurriculars, less non-mandated academic support and professional development for teachers, fewer electives and foreign language offerings.

“The cuts to the programs they’re proposing are heartbreaking. ... Our district is being starved beyond recognition,” said Claire McLaughlin, the mother of a high school student. She is one of the organizers of Fight for Brighton, a parent group that has risen up to advocate for the district.

Grumbling about state education funding is nothing new, but Brighton’s specific complaint comes with a twist.

The fact that Brighton is underfunded, Superintendent Kevin McGowan said, is not unique. He and Fight for Brighton are upset because Brighton is the *most underfunded* district in Monroe County.

Some background: In 2007, New York faced a lawsuit alleging it was not providing sufficient funding for an adequate education at public schools. In response, it created a new formula for foundation aid, the basic state funding stream for districts.

The formula took into account demographic factors, including poverty, as well as the local cost of living and schools’ performance on state tests. In the first two years the foundation aid formula was in effect, spending increased by \$2.3 billion.

After the economy tumbled in 2008, though, the formula was frozen and schools saw no funding increases for three years. There have been some small boosts in the last five years, but they have been flat across-the-board increases, not tied to the factors in the formula.

As a result, the amount of foundation aid funding schools receive today bears little resemblance to what they would receive if the state were still following the formula as agreed upon.

“The target may still make sense, but the steps we’ve taken along the way have created some randomness,” said Bob Lowry, deputy director for advocacy, research & communications for the New York Council of School Superintendents. “The formula starts to lose any relation to whatever measures of need you have in mind.”

Of the 678 districts in the state (not counting New York City), 108 are budgeted to receive less than two-thirds of what the foundation aid formula predicts in 2016-17. That is after factoring in the Gap Elimination Adjustment, a separate mechanism affecting state funding.

Brighton has the sixthlowest percentage in the state, receiving 39 percent of the predicted amount. The formula promises Brighton \$14.8 million in 2016-17, while Gov. Andrew Cuomo's budget proposal allots it \$5.7 million. Of the 19 school districts in Monroe County, only Wheatland-Chili gets its full amount. Conversely, 98 districts across the state are slated to receive more than 125 percent of what the formula predicts. Many are smaller districts where enrollment fluctuations have a greater proportional impact.

The 453-student Hammondsport Central School District in Steuben County, for instance, would get 239 percent of what the formula predicts: \$2.9 million rather than \$1.2 million. Neither the New York State Education Department nor Cuomo's office responded to requests for comment. Eight small cities across the state have sued over their funding levels, claiming they've been shorted tens of millions of dollars.

Brighton's next budget hearing is March 22. The board will adopt a proposal April 12 and the public will vote May 17.

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