

## RSD, other special schools threatened by proposed budget

Written by

### Staff and wire reports

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There's hidden pain in New York's hard-times budget proposal, beyond the public workers, teachers and government agencies facing wage freezes, layoffs and spending cuts.

There are no high-priced TV ad campaigns or legions of lobbyists to fight for about 1,100 children who attend special schools for the deaf, blind and severely disabled, but the programs on which they rely are in jeopardy.

Paul Norris of Perinton is the parent of a special-needs student who flourished in the Rochester School for the Deaf, one of New York's private schools for the deaf, blind and severely disabled. Gov. Andrew Cuomo's budget proposal, which must contend with a \$10 billion deficit and decades of overspending, includes a plan to eliminate \$14 million in recurring direct state funding to help pay tuition at the schools. The cost of attending some of these schools can range from \$40,000 a year to more than \$100,000.

Norris moved his family from New Hampshire to the Rochester area so his son, Cooper, then 2 ½, could attend the

school.

The Rochester area, home also to Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf, has one of the largest per capita deaf populations in the United States. Although no accurate count has been done, as many as 7,000 deaf people live here.

Cooper is now a 16-year-old sophomore who lives at the school during the week. He left the school briefly during elementary school to try life in a mainstream school, only to return two years later.

"We paid a high price to have him in this school," said Norris. "For it to potentially be falling apart now is heartbreaking."

Cuomo would transfer most of the direct state funding for the schools to local school districts, the way other special education programs are funded through a complex school aid formula that takes into account district taxpayers' relative wealth.

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The districts would receive the funding that the schools had received directly, but there would be \$14 million less of it on a recurring basis. The first year, the state will not pay any of the \$98 million in aid for the schools, but that is because there is a lag in the reimbursement to the districts, according to the state Division of the Budget.

But parents and the schools fear that districts, already facing a nearly 8 percent cut in state aid, will be forced to keep these or future students in district schools, a less expensive alternative than the specialized schools.

"There's an assumption that one size fits all, that every student can make it in the mainstream if you just get the right services," said Pat DeCaro of Perinton, a volunteer at the Rochester School for the Deaf, who has deaf relatives. "There are students who don't make it in the mainstream."

Norris said RSD, which serves children to age 21, has become a second home for Cooper.

"These kids have had the opportunity to have normal school experiences within their school," he said.

While the proposed budget action wouldn't completely eliminate funding for the schools on Long Island, in New York City, Buffalo and Rochester, those in the schools say the future is uncertain.

"We already have a severe shortage of teachers, interpreters and note-takers. So how could a school district possibly serve those children?" said Harold Mowl Jr., superintendent of the RSD and chairman of the schools' association.

"This really frightens me," he said through an interpreter for the deaf.

On Wednesday, Mowl and a handful of RSD students attended advocacy day in Albany, where they joined about 150 educators, parents and students of other schools for the deaf, blind, and severely disabled. The group met with more than 70 legislators to discuss their concerns, said Mowl, who returned on Thursday to Rochester, where he attended a meeting of RSD's Parent-Staff Association.

The group is planning another trip to Albany on Thursday, where they will rally at the legislative building, said Mowl.

"If it wasn't for the School for the Deaf, I wouldn't be where I am," said Scott Keller,

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a 2006 graduate of the Rochester school who's now majoring in communications with a minor in English.

The Cuomo administration says its new funding model treats schools for deaf and blind students like other private special education schools are treated.

Though RSD is considered private, it does not charge tuition to parents and is state-supported.

State Sen. Suzi Oppenheimer, a Westchester Democrat, knows the value of the schools. She has 11 relatives who are deaf. Public school settings where individuals would often be taught alone without disabled classmates can lack the push that helps these students thrive, she said.

But she has another concern. Just as the state has said it has ended years of pushing health, education and other costs onto local governments, the budget proposal would slam local school districts again. "It doesn't make any sense," Oppenheimer said.

Cuomo and lawmakers know the pain but say New York has little choice now.

"This has been the problem for the past 10 years," Cuomo said recently. "We spend too much, we tax too much ... you cannot spend more than you make."

*Includes reporting by staff writers Jill Terreri and Sean Dobbin, and Michael Gormley of The Associated Press.*

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