Monroe schools get NY aid add

\$64M boost restores some Gap funds

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As final wrangling continued Tuesday over the last details of the state budget, the state Education Department released school aid runs for 2015-16.

In total, Monroe County's public schools are in line for \$64 million more than the \$861 million they will get this school year, excluding increased payments to reimburse districts for voterapproved construction projects.

But still a sticking point for local education leaders are plans to require districts to negotiate new teacher evaluation systems as called for by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo. Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie, D-Bronx, said Tuesday

See AID, Page 9A

Article Continued Below

See AID on Page A09

Aid

Continued from Page 1A

afternoon that Cuomo's call for education reform was still on the table, but would be modified before the final budget deal was passed.

The state Education Department would be tasked with developing new evaluation policies.

"The difference is before in the governor's original proposal, he didn't want any money to go out the door unless there was a new statewide evaluation system," Heastie said. "This one is different where the money will go out the door, but the school districts will have to respond and get an approval from SED by the middle of November, so it's different." But Jody Siegle, executive director of the Monroe County School Boards Association said the plan to impose an arbitrary set of reforms and deadline on schools was problematic. She noted that changes to teacher evaluations have been part of state budget negotiations for four of the past five years. "Changing the teacher evaluations under these circumstances has created unforseen consequences year after year, and yet here they are doing it again," she said.

And, she said, a new edict that districts use an outside evaluator as part of the process not only undermines significant and costly training district leaders undertook to comply with previous requirements, but also imposes yet another unfunded mandate on the schools.

"Why are the schools having this new requirement and cost foisted upon them when there is no logical justification for it?" she said.

As for the aid increase, much of it comes from a reduction in the Gap Elimination Adjustment, a measure that was supposed to be temporary when it was enacted in the 2009-10 school year to help the state shore up its own struggling finances. The Gap Elimination Adjustment takes a chunk of state education aid that's supposed to go to each of the state's 698 school districts and reroutes it back to the general fund. Since it was implemented, \$9 billion in promised funding to schools has been rerouted back to the state, more than \$443 million in Monroe County alone.

According to the state Education Department documents, the state budget would restore to Monroe County schools about \$31 million that otherwise would have been diverted under the GEA. "It is somewhat gratifying to see the state starting to take seriously their obligation to fund education, but it would be better if it was not tied to arbitrary requirements," said Siegle. "But this will mean more money for our districts, and more money coming into the county and tax increases will be lower for the coming season and that's a

1 of 2 4/4/2015 8:02 PM

good side effect of this." Districts in line for the greatest aid increases by percentage here include: East Irondequoit, where aid will rise by 14 percent; Fairport, East Rochester and Wheatland-Chili, where aid will increase 12 percent; and Webster, where aid will increase by 11 percent.

James Brennan, assistant superintendent for finance in the West Irondequoit schools, said the additional aid would allow the district to add teachers in order to lower class sizes in elementary schools and add more support staff to provide special education services.

"We are definitely staying under the tax levy cap this year, and this funding gives us more flexibility in staying under the cap," he said. "We are definitely looking at taxpayer relief as well as some decisions regarding staff increases."

Bolgen Vargas, superintendent of the City School District, said he was pleased with the increase in aid. His 2015-16 budget proposal, outlined last month, banked on boost of \$25.9 million. According to the aid runs, the district is in line for \$29 million. "We are committed to providing schools the resources they need to improve student achievement, and the state budget allows us to meet that commitment," he said in a written statement. Overall, the budget calls for a 6 percent increase statewide in school aid, about \$1.6 billion more than the current year, for a total of \$23.5 billion.

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2 of 2 4/4/2015 8:02 PM