

Budget votes come amid surge in state and federal funds

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ALBANY – New York’s nearly 700 school districts will seek voter approval Tuesday for their budgets for the fiscal year starting July 1, saying they are offering austere spending plans after receiving an infusion of state and federal aid.

The districts are averaging a 2.9% spending increase and seeking to raise the tax levy, which is the total amount of property taxes collected, by 1.4%, state records from Department of Education showed.

Twenty school districts will look to override the property tax cap, which will require a 60% vote from the public.

Still, districts said they have largely been able to stay under the 2% tax cap in large part due to a record state aid increase of 11% in the state budget, which hiked school spending to \$29.5 billion, a \$3 billion increase from the prior fiscal year.

Also, schools continue to see enrollment drop: The districts estimated they may have about 18,000 fewer students in the fall compared to this year, a drop of 1.2%, the records showed.

“The influx of school aid that was included in the state budget has allowed districts to keep core programs and services intact, add extracurricular and elective courses, address student mental health needs and establish programs to reverse learning loss caused by the pandemic,” said David Albert, a spokesman for the state School Boards Association.

Districts last year had an unprecedented surge in turnout due to the COVID-19 pandemic – not in person, but by mail.

Last year, budget votes were pushed to June because of the virus’s spread

and voting was conducted solely by mail. But the ease of voting in mail led typically sparsely attended school votes to soar, doubling and tripling in vote counts.

This year, districts are back to in-person voting with COVID safety protocols in place, but were also allowing the absentee voting option by requesting it through the district.

Few school districts each year try to override the property tax cap, which was installed in 2011 by the state Legislature and Gov. Andrew

yet still need supermajority approval,” Albert said.

If a district’s budget fails, they can seek a second vote in June. But if that vote fails, the district would be unable to raise taxes at all.

The school budget votes come at a unique time for schools. Not only did they get a record increase in state aid to put toward their budgets, they are also figuring out how to best spend billions of dollars more in federal stimulus money they have received.

Cuomo. It is difficult to achieve the 60% override.

The tax cap each year is limited to 2% or the rate of inflation, whichever is lower. This year, it is 2%.

But the cap is not that simple. Each district has its own tax cap limit based on a complex formula that takes into account a district's size, growth and other factors.

And the cap often has some anomalies. This year, while 20 districts are seeking an override, nine are doing so because they have a negative tax cap amount, meaning they would have to cut spending to stay under the cap.

For example, the Cuba-Rushford school district in Allegany County is proposing a flat levy but needs 60% voter approval because its tax cap is negative 1.7%. "A district can propose no tax levy increase

Districts are required to propose their spending plans for the stimulus money by July and also hold events to get public input.

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