
New York's schools continue to hold line on spending, trade group says



Second grade students work at the computer at Bellevue Elementary School at 530 Stolp Ave, in Syracuse, Monday March 28, 2016. (*Michael Greenlar | mgreenlar@syracuse.com*)

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Syracuse, NY –When is New York's 2 percent tax cap on school taxes, not a cap? When it is trumped by a low inflation rate.

Under state law, school districts may comply with the tax cap by increasing their levy by 2 percent or the increase in the Consumer Price Index, whichever is less. This year the CPI was lower than 2 percent.

That means the allowable tax levy limit this school year is 0.9 percent, the lowest level since the inception of the tax cap placed by the state on school districts and municipalities in 2012, according to an analysis of data by the New York State Association of School Business Officials.

Voters will go to the polls on May 17 to vote on school budgets for the 2016-2017 school year and to elect school board members.

Even though they are allowed to ask voters for more, an analysis by the trade group of 669 school districts shows that on average districts are asking for tax levy increases of about 0.7 percent. That again is the lowest level increase in six years.

A tax levy is the total amount of property taxes a school district collects to balance its budget. It is the basis for determining the property tax rate for towns and villages.

On average school districts will ask voters to approve spending increases of about 2.2 percent when they go to the polls on May 17. The difference between spending and the tax levy are made up by other sources of revenue, such as state aid.

"School leaders, particularly school business officials, have crafted budgets that continue to incorporate efficiencies and cost saving measures, while delivering a quality educational program acceptable to the voters," said Michael J. Borges, NYSASBO's executive director.

In March, the NYSASBO reported that 42 districts had proposed budgets that were above the tax cap. Those budgets must be approved by a supermajority of voters.

This year the state restored the Gap Elimination Adjustment, the amount of money it had cut from school funding during the recession.

"Now that the GEA is finally gone for good, state policymakers need to turn their attention to making sure the Foundation Aid formula operates as intended and drives additional resources to high need districts facing enrollment growth," Borges said.

The data shows that student enrollment continues to decline across the state, with one large exception. High-need districts are experiencing enrollment growth, particularly in students who are living in poverty and those who are English language learners, which require more services.

The growth in those populations is putting a greater financial burden on districts that already spend less per pupil than districts than other districts, Borges said.

The fiscally dependent Big 5 city school districts, such as Syracuse, are not required to file information and were not included in the analysis by NYSASBO.

New York State Association of School Business Officials

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