The 26 school officials reporting their annual vote results to the Press-Republican on Tuesday night were all upbeat: their budgets and propositions had passed.

Chalk that up, in most cases, to a bigger boost in aid from New York state.

School districts are finally, for 2016-17, able to invest in educational programs after years of scaling back on everything: jobs, sports, field trips, materials, to name a few areas.

And the best news for taxpayers is that they did it with only moderate increases in the local share of costs.

Only three North Country districts asked for more than a 2 percent tax increase; AuSable Valley at 2.35 percent; Northern Adirondack, 3.5 percent; and Westport, 2.09 percent. And even they met their state tax cap. No local schools needed a 60 percent "supermajority" vote this year, which is what happens when a district exceeds its cap.

The main reasons schools were able to restore some programs and positions while keeping taxes low is that New York upped its aid considerably and cut the Gap Elimination Adjustment, which had been siphoning off money from schools.

This year's budgets were so noncontroversial that it spilled over, unfortunately, into school-board races, many of which were uncontested. Some didn't even draw enough candidates to stock the open seats, meaning write-in votes will decide who helps make important decisions that affect our communities, and some terms remain vacant.
The North Country was not alone in registering successful budget votes. The New York School Boards Association reported Wednesday that 98.5 percent of school budgets passed.

The passage rate was 99.7 percent for districts with budgets within the tax cap and 77.8 percent for those exceeding their caps. That's a reminder to superintendents and boards for next year that taxpayers want districts to come in below or at the levy-increase figure set by the state.

School Board Association Executive Director Timothy Kremer noted the state's "large infusion" of aid and its role in budget passages.

"The question is, will the state be able to sustain that commitment going forward?" he asked. "The tax cap may be helping to keep taxes down, but it comes at a cost to our schools, which now need the state to make up for the funding they cannot raise locally."

Kremer is right on target. There is no doubt that area schools have been careful with their spending since the imposition of the tax cap, proving its worth.

But the cap severely limits what schools can extract from local residents without a battle; numerous local districts had caps under 1 percent this year.

Districts have been forced to either put forth an unpopular budget or cut programs and jobs.

For the first few years, some true fat was carved from schools. But at this point, not much is left to trim.

The state came through this year. But if the New York skimps on future funding, cuts will go deeper into educational offerings — and that will impair the quality of students produced.
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