

Spending gap widens among school districts

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The spending disparity between high-need and low-need school districts has continued to increase, says a report on school district spending over a nine-year period by a statewide group.

In the 2013-14 school year, financially well off districts spent \$5,828 more per pupil than high-need districts, up from a \$5,020 difference in 2011-12, said the report by the New York State Association of School Business Officials (NYSASBO). It reviewed districts' spending and funding from 2005-06 to 2014-15.

Rome is considered a high-need/low-wealth district, including larger numbers of students considered to be economically disadvantaged and more students with disabilities. It spends an average of \$20,892 per pupil, compared to an average of \$30,358 for the state's 100 wealthiest districts, said a separate report earlier this year by the Alliance for Quality Education.

Among other findings in the NYSASBO report, school district spending statewide in 2014-15 rose 4.1 percent from the prior year. Among spending categories over nine years, teacher pension costs grew the most, rising 155 percent, while spending rose 59 percent for health care. Spending for special education grew by 43 percent over an eight-year period for which information was available, and by 22 percent for general education.

"The state not only needs to meet its constitutional and legal commitments to fund public schools, but to do so in a manner that both insures the equitable and adequate allocation of resources as well as the efficient use of those resources," said NYSASBO Executive Director Michael Borges. Regarding state financial aid for schools, he said "now that the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) is finally gone, the state can focus on restoring the foundation aid formula back to its promised amount." The GEA involved the state withholding some aid from districts in prior years.

The NYSASBO report noted that spending is driven in large part by state mandates. It recommends the state examine funding for non-instructional areas, such as pupil transportation and school construction, and develop more efficient methods of providing support. This could free up resources to fund instruction through general-purpose assistance such as foundation aid, the report said.

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