

Most Dutchess schools would see state aid increase under Cuomo plan

Nina Schutzman, Poughkeepsie Journal 6:03 a.m. ET Jan. 23, 2017



(Photo: AP)

Most local school districts would see a boost in state aid if the budget proposed by Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#) is approved.

The Democratic governor unveiled his \$152.3 billion state budget proposal last week, laying out a wide-ranging plan that would increase spending on schools by about \$1 billion in the 2017-18 year.

The aid increase, about a 4 percent hike, would bring the state's support for its school to nearly \$26 billion, the most per capita of any state in the nation (<http://www.wgrz.com/news/education/nys-school-spending-87-above-us-average/239026428>). Cuomo's proposed school spending is about half of what was sought (</story/news/politics/albany/2016/12/12/ny-education-dept-7-school-aid-hike-sought/95346948/>) by the state Board of Regents, which oversees education policy in New York.

Of 16 local districts in Dutchess and Ulster counties, the Pawling Central School District is the only one that could see a state aid decrease under Cuomo's plan. This school year, Pawling's total aid is just over \$6.7 million; under Cuomo's proposal, it would drop by about \$38,900.

In the other 15 local districts, proposed aid increases range from 0.8 percent in the Red Hook Central School District to 11.9 percent in the Marlboro Central School District.

Neysa Sensenig, Pawling's assistant superintendent of finance, said she's not concerned about the slight drop in proposed funds.

Without seeing a detailed breakdown of the aid proposal, which was not publicly available, Sensenig said she's not sure which aid category the decrease would come from. But she thinks it's related to an expenditure or enrollment-based category of aid — if the district reduces certain spending, aid for that category (such as transportation) would also drop.

"It is not unexpected," Sensenig said of the proposed amount. Pawling's overall budget is about \$37.1 million this school year.

The proposed state aid increase in Marlboro "is encouraging," said Patrick Witherow, the district's business and finance director. "But it shouldn't be seen as Marlboro getting special attention ... We are just getting caught up to where we should have been."

Marlboro grappled with a fiscal crisis (</story/news/local/2014/11/23/return-danskammer-marlboro-district/19463265/>) after its largest taxpayer, power-producer Dynegy Inc., filed bankruptcy in 2011. Dynegy operated two power plants in the district. As the plants' assessed values plummeted, property tax revenue dropped, taxes skyrocketed, schools were closed and jobs were cut.

The district lost "a significant amount of value" in the 2013-14 and 2014-15 years, Witherow said. State aid formulas take a district's property wealth into consideration when allocating funds — but the state just started using Marlboro's more recent, lower value to determine how much money it should get. So the increase "is a direct result of the loss of overall value in Marlboro."

Cuomo has proposed that Marlboro receive \$15.6 million in aid for the 2017-18 year. This year, the district's total aid is \$13.9 million and the overall budget is \$54 million.

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Like Sensenig, Witherow said a detailed breakdown is necessary to determine what the proposal means for district spending. But overall, "we've weathered the storm pretty well," Witherow said. "Last year, we actually started growing the program again."

Cuomo proposed a 7.9 percent state aid increase for the Wappingers Central School District, [Dutchess County's](#) largest. The district's overall 2016-17 budget is \$221 million and state aid makes up \$56.7 million of it. The proposed increase would mean Wappingers would get \$61 million in aid during the 2017-18 year.

A 3.2 percent increase in aid has been proposed for the [Poughkeepsie City School District \(/story/news/education/2017/01/18/poughkeepsie-school-aid-delayed/96688154/\)](#), which has the lowest property wealth and highest rate of economically disadvantaged students (80 percent) in Dutchess. The increase would give Poughkeepsie \$65.7 million in aid for the 2017-18 year. This school year, about \$63.7 million (67 percent) of Poughkeepsie's \$95 million budget is funded through state aid.

Two local districts would get community schools aid — more than \$2 million is proposed for Poughkeepsie and about \$88,000 is proposed for Beacon. The state community schools initiative was launched in 2013 to provide district students in distressed communities with support services outside of school.

The state Legislature has until March 31 to approve an on-time budget for the fiscal year that starts April 1.

Lawmakers typically add more state aid for schools during budget negotiations.

Michael Borges, executive director of the state Association of School Business Officials, said Cuomo's proposal is a "Jekyll and Hyde approach to school aid."

On one hand, the proposal "makes improvements to the Foundation Aid formula recommended by our Foundation Aid Task Force," Borges said via statement. "On the other hand (it) eviscerates the Foundation Aid formula by severing the connection with the full phase in amount. That full phase in amount is the cost of student success."

The Alliance for Quality Education, a union-backed group, said Cuomo's \$1 billion proposal for the next fiscal year would not be enough.

"It's time for the governor to stop just talking about two public education systems, one for the rich and one for the poor, and get serious about ending educational inequality that has grown to record-setting levels due to his policies," the group's legislative director, Jasmine Gripper, said in a statement.

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