

Voters head to the polls today to decide fate of school budgets

By KESHIA CLUKEY 5:20 a.m. | May. 17, 2016

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ALBANY — Voters throughout New York State head to the polls Tuesday to decide the fate of school budgets for the 2016-17 academic year and select members to their local boards of education.

The majority of the 669 districts — not including the Big 5 city schools — plan to stay within the state’s 0.12 percent cap on property tax levy increases, according to the New York State Association of School Business Officials. The cap was driven below the normal 2 percent level by the minimal rate of inflation, though the rate varies district by district due to a complicated calculation.

“For most school districts it’s a good fiscal year,” said Michael Borges, the association’s executive director.

The recently adopted state budget for Fiscal Year 2017 includes a nearly \$627 million increase in Foundation Aid, and fully restored the Gap Elimination Adjustment, a formula established during the 2008 recession that distributed cuts to school districts as the state grappled with deficits. Both will help districts restore staff and program cuts lost during the recession.

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Statewide, districts are proposing to raise their tax levies by \$21 billion, a 0.7 percent increase over the 2015-16 school year — the smallest increase in six years, Borges said.

More than half the districts — 337 — plan to come within \$100 of their cap, according to an Empire Center for Public Policy [analysis](#).

Most budgets are expected to pass, Borges said.

“The tax cap went into place in the 2012-13 school year [and] every year since then, the budget passage rate has been above 95 percent,” he said. “Last year it was 99 percent, so you can’t do much better than that.”

Eighty-two districts have negative tax caps, meaning their cap is less than what was levied the previous year, Borges said. Many of those districts will use their reserve funds to make up the difference. Eighteen of the 82 districts plan to override the cap.

Statewide, 36 districts are expected to propose an override — the highest number since the cap was implemented, Borges said. By comparison, just 19 districts proposed an override in 2015-16.

For some districts, it’s not as risky to propose an override as it has been in past years. Overriding the cap requires a supermajority vote. If the budget is voted down, the

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district can go back to the public in June. If it's voted down again, the district must implement a contingency budget, falling back on whatever its budget was the previous year.

But this year, the contingency budget for those with negative caps would be more than what they can levy under the current cap, he said.

Read an analysis of the districts with negative caps here: <http://bit.ly/1V6UvNS>.

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