

DECEMBER 2015

Representing 110,000 students and their parents in Albany, Schenectady, Schoharie, Saratoga, Rensselaer, Columbia and Greene Counties

New York's schools need a foundation for success



Changes that would make a difference for schools, students and communities

- › **School funding:** Provide adequate state aid to schools by ending the GEA and committing to Foundation Aid.
- › **Tax Cap:** Make simple, sensible modifications to the tax cap to provide schools and communities with more stability.
- › **Teacher Evaluations:** Rebuild a teacher evaluation system that is fair, credible and reliable — and keeps the focus on improving instruction.
- › **SED Capacity:** Invest in the ability of the State Education Department to support education improvement efforts and to fulfill basic functions such as the timely review of capital projects that will help schools and the economy.

The world that this year's high school graduates will make their way in bears little resemblance to the one that their parents entered after their own graduation. We live in a highly complex, mobile society. Global competition is more intense. The jobs are different, and require different combinations of skills. For our state and schools to prosper in a new era, their partnership must be stronger than ever. Schools need a foundation for success and this requires positive and responsive state action to provide stability, proper resources, and flexibility to implement and sustain improvement efforts.

This legislative position paper from 47 school superintendents across the seven county area that makes up Capital Region and Questar III BOCES focuses on changes in four key areas that could help build, and in some cases rebuild, this foundation for success. This is especially important as the state contemplates new directions in the areas of standards and assessments with the recent release of the Common Core Task Force final report. Our state is just emerging from a period of fiscal uncertainty, and much can be learned from the hurried state reform efforts of recent years. Schools are ready to move forward and capitalize on new opportunities. The proposed changes outlined in this paper would cement a strong

As our economy rebounds, schools are in something of a fragile recovery. As lawmakers work on the state budget, the rule should be, "First, do no harm."

state-public school partnership and set the stage for a period of remarkable progress and student achievement.

Provide adequate state aid through money already owed to schools — the GEA and Foundation Aid

In the years since the Wall Street crash of 2008, the state has withheld promised funding from districts in order to address its own fiscal challenges. The Foundation Aid formula, designed to provide every student with a sound basic education, was frozen for three years, followed by formula-driven increases being artificially capped in more recent state budgets. As a result, the state is \$4.4 billion behind the full phase-in of the formula. The withholding of aid through the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) was intended as a temporary measure to help close state budget deficits. It's been in place for five years now, even as the state runs a surplus. The GEA balance owed to schools statewide today stands at \$434 million. Nearly a third of

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New York's school districts are receiving less aid this year than they did in 2009-10.

The impact of the Great Recession on New York's schools was real and it has been lasting. Class sizes increased, professional training opportunities were curtailed, and advanced courses were cut, as were early interventions, opportunities for extra help, and extracurricular activities. At its low point, the educational workforce was reduced by 30,000 people.

This year, thanks to the efforts of legislators to make education funding a priority, many districts were finally able to restore some teaching positions. A sufficient school funding increase is needed in 2016-17, and a commitment to adequate and stable state aid into the future is required to make sure this progress continues and is not undone.

In line with the Educational Conference Board's recent recommendation of a \$2.2 billion state aid increase in the 2016-17 state budget, we advocate for the following actions:

- **Provide sufficient state aid to allow schools to continue current programming in 2016-17:** The Educational Conference Board (ECB) estimated that this alone would require a \$1.7 billion increase. (This included funding to offset

the devastating impact that a projected tax cap near zero percent will have on many districts.)

- **End the Gap Elimination Adjustment and provide a significant increase in Foundation Aid:** The \$434 million GEA is primarily owed to low- and/or average- needs districts, while those districts with the greatest needs and challenges are owed the larger share of the \$4.4 billion Foundation Aid shortfall. Thus, after ending the GEA, a significant Foundation Aid increase will be required to ensure that the needs of all students are met in an equitable manner.
- **Commit to Foundation Aid for the long-term:** An adequate, ongoing investment in schools, through fully phasing in Foundation Aid and realizing its original promise, is a cornerstone of the partnership between the state and its schools.
- **Fully fund expense-based reimbursements:** These are reimbursements for approved costs for basic functions and commitments such as transportation, technology, and BOCES services. We also support ECB's call for \$500 million in targeted funding for priority areas that include expanding graduation pathways to supporting struggling schools and English language learners.

It's not a 2% cap

Year	Allowable Levy Growth Factor for Schools
2012-13	2.00%
2013-14	2.00%
2014-15	1.46%
2015-16	1.62%
2016-17	0.02% Projected ¹

¹Average monthly change in Consumer Price Index, Jan.-Sept. 2014 vs. Jan.-Oct. 2015

Source: Office of the New York State Comptroller, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

Make simple, sensible modifications to the property tax cap

New York State is committed to placing some form of a limit on local taxes, but the current property tax law has some significant shortcomings that create uncertainty for school districts and communities.

For one, it's not a 2 percent cap as it was advertised. The eight-part tax cap formula allows levies to grow by either 2 percent or the change in the Consumer Price Index — whichever is less — and then adjusts for a variety of other factors. For the coming year, the CPI figure will be considerably less than the 2 percent: it had increased only *two-hundredths of one percent* through October.

As a result, many districts are anticipating the prospect of being unable to raise any local revenue to help meet increased costs. Unless action is taken, this will do serious harm to student programs and services in districts across New York.

The stated intention of the cap was not to impose de facto local tax freezes. To address this flaw in the cap, a clear and sensible solution is to remove the volatility of CPI from the tax cap formula and make the allowable levy growth factor in the formula a consistent 2 percent. Consider:

- It's what many voters believe they were promised.
- The prior year's CPI is a flawed measure on which to base future plans. School

leaders need to build budgets that serve the students who will be in our classrooms next year.

- This shows that the limitations of the cap in any given year can stall, or reverse, progress that is being made in the effort to prepare students for the future.
- The tax cap is uniquely restrictive for schools, which — unlike towns and counties — must hold public budget votes and gain a 60 percent supermajority to exceed their limit. Further, it's ultimately our school children who will pay the price if districts, once again, are forced to cut programs and services.

When New York lawmakers first considered a tax cap, Massachusetts was

Schools are bracing for a tax cap near zero percent, due to the CPI. If lawmakers don't modify the formula, they will need to provide additional state aid to help avoid the damage this will do to student programs.

touted as a model for restraining taxes while still pursuing educational excellence. In reality, New York's cap bears no resemblance to that of Massachusetts, where local governments

can count on the stability of 2.5 percent increases each year.

School superintendents support property tax relief, but not at the expense of New York's students. We need state policies that allow for responsible fiscal planning and the sustainability of programs that are critical to our students and communities.

Simple, sensible modifications to the tax cap would help balance the concerns of taxpayers and the needs of school children.

School superintendents support property tax relief, but not at the expense of New York's students.

Rebuild a **teacher evaluation system** that is fair, credible and reliable – and **keeps the focus on improving instruction**

In 2010, the state enacted a new, more stringent teacher and principal evaluation system, also known as Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR). For the first time, evaluations would be based, in part, on student performance on standardized tests. That law has changed three times in the last five years, most recently with the passage of the state budget in 2015. The current version of APPR is the most rigid, relying on student performance on assessments for at least 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation. Most school districts in the state have successfully sought waivers from the latest requirements.

School superintendents are in a unique position to evaluate the merits and shortcomings of the recent variations on APPR. According to the New York State Council of School Superintendents:

- Superintendents have consistently said that the emphasis on classroom observations in recent APPR systems has led to more careful observations that are improving classroom instruction.
- 70 percent of superintendents surveyed in the fall of 2015 disagreed that the current grades 3-8 tests provided useful information for evaluating teachers; and
- 96 percent of superintendents in the same survey indicated that controversies over state education policies have had a negative impact on their school system.

An evaluation system should not be punitive in nature; it should be focused on helping teachers, principals and schools improve. A quality evaluation system is one that increases conversations about classroom instruction, emphasizes observations that lead to professional growth, and helps school leaders understand areas of strength and identify areas for improvement.

In its recent report, the Common Core Task Force convened by the Governor recommended that the state revise the Common Core standards to reflect New York's needs and priorities, and address issues associated with the Common Core rollout. The task force called for a moratorium on using state assessments to inform evaluations until 2019-20 as a transition to new standards takes place. The Board of Regents enacted the moratorium through emergency regulations.

This is a positive step — particularly if the transition time is used as a much-needed opportunity

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Four characteristics to consider in constructing a new APPR system

- 1. Multiple measures of student achievement:** If evaluations are to be based on student achievement, then it must be on multiple measures, including student work, projects and more than one type of assessment. The student achievement component of an evaluation should never be based solely on one standardized test.
- 2. A menu of APPR plan options:** Instead of one system statewide, evaluation systems can and should vary depending on a district's needs and circumstances. The goal is to drive improvement, not rank and rate educators within and across school systems.
- 3. Discontinue the overly prescriptive role of evaluations in employment decisions:** School districts should have the option to consider evaluations in employment decisions, but this should not be mandatory as it is in the most recent version of the APPR law.
- 4. Restore local control:** Allow schools that can demonstrate the effectiveness of their evaluation system to receive a waiver from the state system.

to rebuild an evaluation system that is fair, credible, reliable and focused on improving instruction. Schools also need more flexibility and greater local control.

Educators invest considerable time and energy in improving our schools every day. High quality evaluations must be part of this effort, and this will require engaging all stakeholders to rebuild the APPR system.

Invest in the capacity of the State Education Department to support schools and fulfill basic functions

The recent Common Core Task Force report and Board of Regents action signaled a new chapter in education reform. We strongly endorse the continued focus on higher standards. Based on the experience of recent years, this transition will require a strong State Education Department (SED) that is able to bring all stakeholders together and provide proactive support and responsive guidance to schools.

As the task force wrote, "The State, BOCES, and teacher preparation programs should also provide ongoing professional development and support tailored to school district superintendents and district administrators to ensure that they are fully prepared to lead and support their staff in the transition to new standards."

Unfortunately, the capacity of SED has diminished over time due to staffing reductions and other factors. As schools undertook the reforms of recent years, school leaders were too often in the position of having to move forward with changes in their own districts, to comply with deadlines or shifting requirements, with no information or only partial information from an understaffed and underfunded department.

If current or new initiatives are to be successful, state lawmakers must make it a priority to ensure that SED has the capacity to carry out the critical mission of supporting schools in the drive to make higher standards a reality in New York's classrooms every day.

Need for timely capital project review and approval

SED staffing reductions have particularly affected the Facilities Planning Unit, resulting in a serious backlog of state approval for capital projects that local voters have already supported.

As of Dec. 9, there were 950 projects in upwards of 300 school systems in the state awaiting approval, according to the website of the Facilities Planning Unit. In the past, school districts could expect SED approval within 6 to 8 weeks. Today, districts are waiting an average of 42 to 44 weeks for projects to be approved so that work can begin.

Long delays between capital project planning and submission and state approval negatively impacts students, taxpayers, the workforce and the economy because:

- School districts have diminished ability to bid projects in a favorable climate and control construction timelines. Furthermore, delays also drive up taxpayer costs, as prices for materials and labor typically increase over time.
- As work is delayed — or deferred because it no longer fits within a project budget — students and residents do not see the benefits of voter-approved health, safety and educational facility improvements.
- The local economy suffers: State approval stands in the way of schools awarding contracts so that carpenters, roofers, masons, electricians, plumbers and other building trade professionals can find work and pump money into the economy of the region and the state.

Recent steps taken by lawmakers and SED may help address some of the current backlog of project reviews. However, as the economy recovers, it is likely that more districts will look to make capital improvements that they put off during the downturn, leading to the serious concern that the current 40-plus week review period could grow longer still. For the sake of students, taxpayers and the economy, a long-term solution for this issue must be a state priority.

Capital Region BOCES	Enrollment 2015-16 ¹	Total Spending 2015-16 ¹	Tax Levy 2015-16 ¹	Outstanding GEA ²	Foundation Aid Underfunded ²
Albany County	38,722	780,902,894	478,073,681	-9,833,720	-61,021,995
ALBANY	11,160	223,971,782	113,999,102	-53,606	-37,448,134
BERNE-KNOX-WESTERLO	855	22,304,857	10,946,198	-584,207	-
BETHLEHEM	4,687	94,162,000	63,480,000	-1,979,685	-3,771,455
COHOES CITY	1,876	40,290,105	14,710,755	-116,289	-2,396,443
GREEN ISLAND	346	6,971,485	3,317,500	-71,361	-364,938
GUILDERLAND	5,015	93,689,600	68,631,860	-1,997,609	-4,535,581
MENANDS	258	8,306,605	6,431,215	-12,657	-149,217
NORTH COLONIE	5,393	102,668,691	78,567,585	-1,792,611	-4,022,255
RAVENA-COEYMANS-SELKIRK	1,825	43,236,730	24,033,941	-1,054,407	-
SOUTH COLONIE	4,801	96,258,321	70,440,111	-1,700,182	-4,731,280
VOORHEESVILLE	1,166	23,149,718	16,746,414	-453,700	-518,048
WATERVLIET CITY	1,340	25,893,000	6,769,000	-17,406	-3,084,645
Saratoga County	12,785	225,623,088	152,875,512	-3,509,894	-9,265,501
BURNT HILLS-BALLSTON LAKE	3,029	62,730,265	37,634,413	-921,301	-815,242
SHENENDEHOWA	9,756	162,892,823	115,241,099	-2,588,593	-8,450,259
Schenectady County	22,261	406,600,391	196,243,065	-4,034,034	-69,158,377
DUANESBURG	710	15,620,918	7,736,823	-261,511	-201,095
NISKAYUNA	4,090	78,085,153	54,219,475	-1,653,338	-4,766,943
ROTTERDAM-MOHONASEN	2,867	48,002,424	25,189,220	-662,153	-2,886,622
SCHALMONT	1,797	45,797,561	27,552,779	-735,816	-343,711
SCHENECTADY CITY	10,147	167,742,333	54,133,771	-23,954	-59,915,486
SCOTIA-GLENVILLE	2,650	51,352,002	27,410,997	-697,262	-1,044,520
Schoharie County	3,734	90,968,004	36,514,711	-1,039,772	-117,630
COBLESKILL-RICHMONDVILLE	1,795	38,516,494	15,248,937	-636,566	-
MIDDLEBURGH	765	20,765,915	9,460,904	-29,796	-117,630
SCHOHARIE	863	22,382,061	9,505,510	-360,848	-
SHARON SPRINGS	311	9,303,534	2,299,360	-12,562	-
Questar III BOCES					
Columbia County	7,183	175,913,515	104,334,491	-2,072,834	-
CHATHAM	1,100	29,901,041	21,187,925	-349,891	-
GERMANTOWN	583	14,502,850	8,371,348	-232,990	-
HUDSON CITY	1,800	45,477,121	21,468,886	-86,414	-
KINDERHOOK	1,858	37,552,000	22,302,988	-923,896	-
NEW LEBANON	405	12,674,751	8,523,344	-109,891	-
TACONIC HILLS	1,437	35,805,752	22,480,000	-369,752	-
Greene County	5,418	127,085,599	63,308,505	-1,552,779	-3,177,180
CAIRO-DURHAM	1,240	28,760,289	12,992,687	-461,728	-
CATSKILL	1,615	40,102,047	17,535,598	-146,644	-1,206,182
COXSACKIE-ATHENS	1,375	29,451,334	16,659,903	-437,108	-1,504,620
GREENVILLE	1,188	28,771,929	16,120,317	-507,299	-466,378
Rensselaer County	19,835	432,405,371	194,935,899	-5,280,847	-24,460,557
AVERILL PARK	2,926	53,906,501	28,712,910	-804,030	-
BERLIN	791	19,099,991	8,890,232	-609,555	-
BRUNSWICK (BRITTONKILL)	1,173	22,425,975	12,008,066	-535,290	-589,827
EAST GREENBUSH	4,009	88,181,329	50,827,256	-1,803,381	-1,308,567
HOOSIC VALLEY	998	20,475,511	8,822,342	-382,129	-942,450
HOOSICK FALLS	1,157	23,145,413	9,470,390	-370,428	-804,520
LANSINGBURGH	2,340	43,550,151	14,803,730	-14,446	-9,614,135
RENSSELAER CITY	1,149	22,868,600	7,476,678	-52,975	-1,766,950
SCHODACK	902	21,724,754	12,785,245	-533,848	-
TROY CITY	4,060	108,163,850	36,109,217	-23,464	-9,434,108
WYNANTS KILL	330	8,863,296	5,029,833	-151,301	-
Total	109,938	2,239,498,862	1,226,285,864	-27,323,880	-167,201,240

¹Source: New York State Education Department, 2015-16 Property Tax Report Card, May 2015

²Source: 2015-16 Enacted State Budget School Aid Database. A “-” indicates districts in “Save Harmless” standing, primarily due to declining enrollment. Figures not shown for non-state aid dependent Questar III districts North Greenbush Common and Berkshire Union Free.

We embrace high standards. To help students achieve them, schools need a foundation for success. This requires positive state action to provide stability, proper resources and flexibility to implement and sustain improvement efforts.

School Superintendents of the Capital Region BOCES

Capital Region BOCES

Charles Dedrick
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Berne-Knox-Westerlo

Timothy Mundell, Superintendent

Bethlehem

Jody Monroe, Interim Superintendent

Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake

Patrick McGrath, Superintendent

Cobleskill-Richmondville

Carl Mumenthey, Superintendent

Cohoes

Jennifer Spring, Superintendent

Duanesburg

Christine Crowley, Superintendent

Green Island

Teresa Snyder, Superintendent

Guilderland

Marie Wiles, Superintendent

Menands

Maureen Long, Superintendent

Middleburgh

Michele Weaver, Superintendent

Mohonasen

Kathleen Spring, Superintendent

Niskayuna

Cosimo Tangorra, Jr., Superintendent

North Colonie

D. Joseph Corr, Superintendent

Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk

Robert Libby, Superintendent

Schalmont

Carol Pallas, Superintendent

Schenectady

Laurence T. Spring, Superintendent

Schoharie

David Blanchard, Superintendent

Scotia-Glenville

Susan Swartz, Superintendent

Sharon Springs

Patterson Green, Superintendent

Shenendehowa

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South Colonie

Jonathan Buhner, Superintendent

Voorheesville

Brian Hunt, Superintendent

Watervliet

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School Superintendents of the Questar III BOCES

Questar III BOCES

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District Superintendent and Chief Executive Officer

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Berkshire

Bruce Potter, Superintendent

Berlin

Stephen Young, Superintendent

Brunswick (Brittonkill)

Angelina Maloney, Superintendent

Cairo-Durham

Anthony Taibi, Superintendent

Catskill

Annemarie Barkman, Interim Superintendent

Chatham

Cheryl Nuciforo, Superintendent

Coxsackie-Athens

Randall Squier, Superintendent

East Greenbush

Angela Nagle, Superintendent

Germantown

Susan Brown, Superintendent

Greenville

Tammy Sutherland, Acting Superintendent

Hoosick Falls

Kenneth Facin, Superintendent

Hoosic Valley

Amy Goodell, Superintendent

Hudson

Maria Suttmeier, Superintendent

Ichabod Crane

George Zini, Superintendent

Lansingburgh

Cynthia DeDominick, Superintendent

New Lebanon

Leslie Whitcomb, Superintendent

North Greenbush

Christine Hamill, Superintendent

Rensselaer

Sally Shields, Superintendent

Schodack

Robert Horan, Superintendent

Taconic Hills

Neil Howard Jr., Superintendent

Troy

John Carmello, Superintendent

Wynantskill

Thomas Reardon, Superintendent

