



# VANTAGE POINT

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NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

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## Public Schools Are Accountable

On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, voters across New York State will go to the polls to cast judgment on budgets for their local schools. This annual ritual of seeking voter approval for operating budgets is just one reason why school districts in New York State are more accountable to the public than any other institution, public or private. Here are a few more.

### Accountability through public reporting

Public schools publish more hard data on their successes and shortcomings than virtually any other institution:

- Through school report cards, parents and taxpayers can begin to gauge how well schools teach and prepare children.
- School and district results on individual state assessments are reported after each test and published in many local newspapers.
- Budget notices, written in plain English, are mailed to every household. These give voters a sense of how their school district budget may change and how it would affect their tax bill.
- Property tax report cards allow voters to compare their district's proposed spending and tax increases with other districts.
- In addition, the State Education Department provides a wealth of information is available through its annual report on the status of the schools.
- Virtually all this information is available over the internet.

### Accountability through elections and public input

No other institution provides so many avenues for public input and involvement:

- Voters themselves have the chance to approve or reject proposed school district budgets in all but the five large cities (In New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers, school budgets must be approved by mayors and city councils). Counties, cities, towns and villages are not required to submit their operating budgets for voter approval.
- School budget development is an open and public process. By itself, the exercise of developing a budget that must go to the voters for approval assures that school budgets get more scrutiny than those for other public services.
- All school districts (save two) are also accountable to voters through elected school boards. If the public is unhappy with the schools, they can vote in new decision makers. (The other two districts – New York City and Yonkers – have boards appointed entirely or chiefly by mayors).
- Finally, school districts provide multiple other avenues to influence policy making – advisory committees, shared-decision making, and parent-teacher associations, for example.

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## New York Continues to Lead

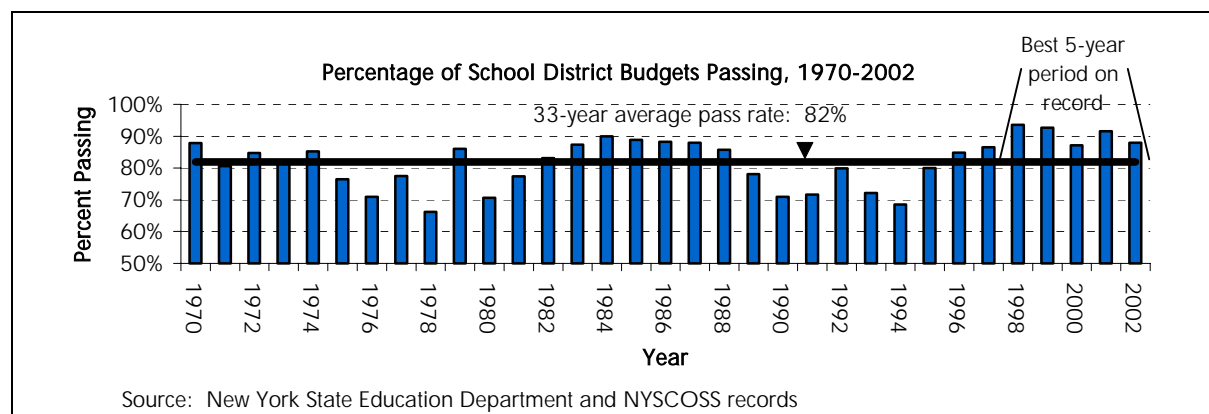
The new No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) imposes new accountability requirements on all schools and districts throughout the nation. New York is ahead of most states in meeting the demands of that new federal law. For example, the NCLB requires

- all states to develop and issue “school report cards”; *New York has had them since 1998.*
- all states to break out student test results by racial/ethnic group and for other groupings – students who have disabilities, limited English proficiency or who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds; *New York started doing this even before the NCLB became law.*
- all teachers be highly qualified by the end of the 2005-06 school year; *New York State policy requires all teachers to be fully certified by September 2003.*

*Education Week*, the national education newspaper of record, gave New York’s accountability structure the highest grade of any state in the nation. New York was also one of the first five states to win approval for its NCLB accountability plan. The public has shown confidence as well: a higher percentage of school district budgets have won voter approval since 1998 than in any five-year period going back to 1970.

## 2003 – New Challenges

This year, school districts must manage reductions in state aid, soaring costs for pensions, health insurance, and energy, and an unusually chaotic state budget process. Also, school districts “go last”, considering their budgets after most counties, towns, and cities have already acted, and in many cases this year, they have adopted double-digit tax increases. Against this confluence of factors, sustaining the recent high rate of approvals could be a challenge. Still, with the momentum of a record state aid restoration by the Legislature, school district leaders hope that voters will once more rise to the challenge and support their public schools.



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