



State leaders must support their public schools

New York State's government is not elected for the purpose of enacting one-sided dictates to the populace. Unilateral actions by the state government have seriously undermined local control and the fiscal stability of school districts.

Schools are currently coping with:

- * Substantial reductions in state aid over the past three years,
- * Passage of a cap limiting increases in local property taxes,
- * No relief from expensive and unnecessary mandates.
- * The imposition of costly new mandates for school operations.

NYS government has a Constitutional obligation to support public education, and must explore every possible source of revenue to support its public education mandate.

"The legislature shall provide for the maintenance and support of a system of free common schools, wherein all the children of this state may be educated." (Article XI, § 1)

This obligation was defined as "a meaningful high school education" by the ruling in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit. As a direct result of that specification, the state passed the **State Education Budget and Reform Act of 2007** which committed the state to a \$7 billion needs-based funding increase to be phased-in over the next four years.

The state followed the law's provisions for two years, (2007-08, 2008-09) but then froze and subsequently reduced aid for the next three years (2009-10, 2010-11, 2011-12). The state no longer follows its law, each year pushing compliance into the future and also establishing a permanent aid reducing formula, the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA), which limits future growth in school aid to align with growth in New York State's personal income.

NYS ranks in the lower third of the 50 states for the portion of education costs that it provides while at the same time enacting expensive requirements for school districts that must be paid for through local property taxes.

School leaders have continually responded to concerns about local property taxes.

The 3-year average of school property tax levy increases in Monroe County is 1.75%.

Due to cuts in state support, programs are not being sustained; school districts have been forced to reduce support services, electives, and student activities.

Reserves are being drawn to fiscally dangerous levels.

The Governor, the State Legislature, and the State Education Department must act to rebalance the equation of expectations on school districts with a realistic revenue stream.

Schools are not able to reduce their major costs without genuine help from state leaders. The largest costs, which rise faster than inflation, are all controlled by state dictates. These include:

- * School districts cannot change the state-determined pension fund contribution requirements, which have increased at a rate far greater than inflation;
- * State laws prohibit school districts from requiring employees to share a greater portion of rapidly rising health insurance costs unless employees agree to do this;
- * School districts have few options for reducing special education costs due to New York's overly prescriptive and costly 200-plus additional special education requirements;
- * The newly passed teacher evaluation law requires significantly greater administrative time, making further administrative staff reductions unlikely.

State leaders will not solve these problems by ignoring their responsibilities. They must obey state laws and honor their legal obligation to the state Constitution by acting to ensure the fiscal stability of their public schools.