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Area districts turn to reps for help on school aid

Universal disappointment in governor's offerings

Area school superintendents were unanimously disappointed in initial aid levels the State Education Department revealed last week for individual Upstate New York districts.

Increases in basic state operating support for most area schools was around two percent, according to preliminary department information.

Alfred-Almond Superintendent Rich Calkins summarized his colleagues' feelings about the limited increases: Gov. Cuomo's "proposals fall woefully short of providing the necessary funding to allow our schools to maintain existing academic programs."

Upstate school board members and superintendents for at least the past five years have commented negatively about an inequity of state aid-to-education levels between affluent downstate districts and rural Upstate New York schools:

"We will be looking to our elected officials to help insure that Western New York kids are provided the same educational opportunities as their peers in other, more affluent parts of the state," Calkins said. "For this to occur our schools and consequently our kids need equitable funding."

The final state budget will be negotiated among Cuomo plus state Assembly and Senate members. Deadline for the document is April 1.

Superintendents also commented about the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA), an Albany procedure that was used for the last five years to tap school aid for balancing the state budget. Educators' comments about the GEA in the past have included such harsh criticism as "criminal" and "balancing the state budget on kids' backs."

The governor in his state-of-the-state address last week said the state will complete GEA reimbursement during the 2017-18 school year.

Calkins said "The GEA, as promised for years, needs to be wholly eliminated so that all parties can focus upon working to insure equitable funding through existing 'foundation aid' processes."

Jeremy Palotti, Canisteo-Greenwood superintendent, said "Elimination of the Canisteo-Greenwood GEA was not as beneficial this year as it only represented a change of \$4,400. I know this was helpful to others but does not significantly impact our revenue forecast for 2016-17.

"We really would have liked improvements with foundation aid, which we did not see. There is a lot of work yet to be done before we will be satisfied with the revenue picture from the state."

Jasper-Troupsburg Superintendent Michael Mead said "Last year, our district saw a significant reduction in building aid and, coupled with all of our other aid revenue allocations, we were only about \$71,000 overall on the positive side from the previous year" for a district budget of \$11.5 million.

The projected increase for 2016-17 over last year is only "a marginal 2.9 percent. With our low socio-economic status, Jasper-Troupsburg had almost received 98 percent of its GEA withholdings with last year's GEA restoration acts.

"While we appreciate the Legislature's efforts to restore the GEA, I'm concerned about additional stewardship for foundation aid this year and moving forward."

Avoca Superintendent Steve Saxton expressed caution: Avoca "is looking at about a 1.7 percent increase without inclusion of building aid. However, about 35 percent of our increase is coming from the 'community schools aid' category which may or may not have strings attached to its use.

"With the governor's proposal, Avoca should receive our full repayment of GEA, which is positive. We are not in the best position possible with the governor's aid proposal. However, we all understand Albany well enough to know that this too may change."

Dr. Rick Timbs, executive director of the Statewide School Finance Consortium, said "Unfortunately, the extremely brief overview of the Executive Budget proposal once again falls short — far short — in providing the financial support public education desperately needs.

"The proposed \$991 million in 'new' state aid is more than \$1.4 billion less than what the Regents thoughtfully recommended to maintain the status quo for our neediest children and school districts."

In a related area, New York State voters passed the Smart Schools Bond Act in November 2014 to bring \$2 billion in education technology to public schools. Most area schools have started preliminary planning for use of the funds to make permanent technology improvements.

Arkport Superintendent Dr. Glenn P. Niles noted the \$570,028 (Smart Schools) total proposed for his district and said "Arkport Central is in good shape with technology. The district has invested in wireless, high-speed fiber and security cameras throughout the school" during the past few years.

Arkport district school board members and administrators "spent much of last school year reviewing current infrastructure and hardware to ensure we are ready to accommodate potential needs for the next five years," Niles said. "This planning will be done in conjunction with our five-year building plan to guarantee our expenditures match district academic and structural needs."

Arkport school board members will meet at 6 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 27 for a presentation from LaBella Architects. The proposal will include information about how the Arkport Smart Schools allocation should be spent, the superintendent said.

Niles said “the district will address needs in technology support and academic enrichment and will continue the commitment to purchase equipment outlined in our long range plan for technology.”

District/Aid/ Percent increase/Smart School allocationsn Addison \$12,643,874 2.8% \$1,654,167n Alfred-Almond 4,539,223 4.8% 609,287n Arkport 4,153,985 2.8% 570,028n Avoca 5,718,273 2.1% 726,321n Bath 14,398,646 2.6% 1,826,167n Canaseraga 2,831,079 2.2% 384,755n Canisteo-Greenwood 11,442,362 2.5% 1,413,197n Jasper-Troupsburg 5,677,571 2.9% 717,728

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