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Residents' economic stability varies in area school districts

Less than 15 percent of Utica's students come from families considered economically stable.

The average median income for Utica's households is a bit more than \$30,000, and last year, district students rallied the state to give their district its fair share of funding after science classes ran out of chemicals to finish experiments.

Things, however, are different in New Hartford schools.

Buffalo Business First last month released a database of upstate school districts ranked by median incomes. New Hartford is at the top of the region's school systems. Utica is at the bottom.

A median is a midpoint — meaning half the households in a district earn more than the median household income and half earn less.

"This list gives you a good idea of the wide gap between the two portions of New York, both in terms of income levels and the cost of living," the report states.

Area districts with the highest average median incomes include:

* New Hartford: \$71,333.

* Westmoreland: \$70,583.

* Holland Patent: \$66,432.

Districts with households reporting the lowest median incomes include:

* Herkimer: \$39,620.

* New York Mills: \$35,921.

* Utica: \$31,173.

"We don't want to over-generalize, but people with a lower income are probably working one or two jobs pretty close to minimum wage," said Rick Timbs, executive director of the Statewide School Finance Consortium.

"For them to make a decent amount of money, you have to work a lot of hours," he said. "What you end up with is less parental contact, communication, intervention and cooperation. And it's not for lack of trying from the parent; it's just the limitation of time."

Higher income areas, Timbs said, might even enter school with a greater advantage.

"The kids may get a better wealth of experience," Timbs said. "Their parents may take them to see musicals, plays, they may read a lot. They may have access to some type of preschool. They may experience more vocations. They may be better at English language arts, communicating."

Bob Nole, superintendent of the New Hartford Central School District, said that while his district is ranked high on Business First's median income list, it's listed very low — nearly 400 out of 431 districts — on a ranking by percentage of revenues that come from state and federal sources.

"State-aid formulas are complex and school leaders continue to advocate that state aid be distributed adequately and equitably," Nole wrote in an email. "While there continue to be economic challenges, we remain committed to ensuring that our students are college, career and citizen ready."

According to data from the state Education Department, 62 percent of the district's revenue came from local funding in 2014. For Utica, that number was less than 17 percent.

"Because there are so many low income households, what do you tax?" Timbs asked. "And the state doesn't come forward with the support. It's a literal Catch 22."

But that's not to say communities should give up hope, he said.

"What we don't want to say is there's nothing you can do with these kids," Timbs said. "There's a lot to be done. I think schools like Utica are trying very hard. But it goes back to resources."

District officials from Holland Patent and Westmoreland did not immediately return calls for comment.

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