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School districts get proposed increases, but claim more is owed

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"It sounds like a lot of money, but so much is owed to schools like Utica," said Rick Timbs, Statewide School Finance Consortium executive director. "It's just insufficient to maintain the status quo."

In the 30-district region spanning Oneida, Herkimer and Madison counties, every school district except the Brookfield Central saw an increase in proposed aid. Brookfield officials didn't respond to request for comment.

Those with the highest regional, proposed aid amounts include:

- Utica: \$108 million, a 3 percent increase over last year. There nearly are 10,000 students in the district.
- Rome: \$60 million, also a 3 percent increase. Rome has about 5,200 students.
- Central Valley: \$30 million, a 2 percent increase. There nearly are 2,300 students in the district.

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Utica schools Superintendent Bruce Karam said while he and his team still are going through the numbers and plugging them into the budget, they're crossing their fingers it'll be enough.

"We're just hoping we won't have any layoffs," Karam said. "Utica is still not receiving its fair share. I'm hoping that down the road, we will receive our fair share so we can continue to reduce class sizes and create support programs. We are very grateful for the increase, but we're still underfunded."

The governor's proposed budget includes a \$991 million — or 4.3 percent — increase for the 2016-17 school year. According to a news release, the proposal provides operating aid increases to every school district in the state. Brookfield does see an increase before building aid, the amount the district is reimbursed for building projects, is taken into account.

"More and more, education is everything if you're going to get ahead and do well in this economy," Cuomo said in his State of the State address. "I believe in the promise of education and its potential to serve as the doorway to opportunity. For generations of New Yorkers, education has been the ladder to climb out of poverty. Today, the need for that ladder is greater than it has ever been."

But Timbs said the increase the governor has proposed isn't really an increase at all. It won't mean extra cash for districts because of how much is owed to them in foundation aid and through the Gap Elimination Adjustment.

"If I was supposed to pay you \$10 for the week, and I pay you \$4 this week and \$5 next week, did you get a raise?" Timbs reasoned. "The key thing is they owe us \$4.9 billion. (The proposal is) not even a good down payment."

Assemblyman Anthony Brindisi, D-Utica, said he's also not satisfied with the proposed aid or their disbursements.

"I think it's a starting point for discussion on how we best fund public schools, but we have a long way to go from the current proposal the governor put out," he said.

State Sen. Joseph Griffo, R-Rome, said he will be meeting with superintendents over the next week to get their perspectives.

"I think that's the important thing to note, that this is a starting point," Griffo said. "The governor's proposal is not the end. We are going to improve upon

that.”

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