

# Narrative for ECASB's GEA Press Conference

## 10/24/14

10 am

**JANE:** Good Morning and welcome,

I'm Jane Burzynski, Director of the Erie County Association of School Boards, and we're here this morning to release our State of the Schools Report on the Impact of Gap Elimination Adjustments (GEA) on Erie County School Districts over the past five years, and the efforts of several local legislators to help "Do Away with the GEA."

With us are Senators  
Patrick Gallivan,  
Mark Grisanti and  
Tim Kennedy

And Assembly representatives  
Jane Corwin,  
Michael Kearns,  
Sean Ryan and  
Robin Schimminger.

Also with us are Erie 1 BOCES Interim Superintendent Lynda Quick and our ECASB Legislative Team Leader Scott Johnson, from the Sweet Home Board of Education.

The State of the Schools Report is an overview of each of the impact of GEA reductions on our school districts. NYS started the GEA back in 2009 to help reduce its own deficit during the economic crisis ... it is now simply the state's annual practice of taking back school aid.

The total aid taken by GEA from the Erie County districts in this survey tops \$482.9 million. During the past three years, districts also have operated under the Tax Levy Cap which restricts the amount of funds districts can raise locally. The tax levy cap is particularly toxic in our region of low and average wealth communities. In a high wealth region, a one or two percent levy can raise huge amounts of money. Our region don't have that kind of wealth, so the 1 or 2% raises only modest amounts, while still putting a greater financial burden on local property owners. What we don't want to do as we try to fund schools is to further pressure our communities, so even though this report lists how much districts would be allowed to raise under the tax levy cap, please note that most, if not all, worked to keep under that cap.

If the state were paying its share, and restoring funding taken by the GEA, there would be far less reliance on local property taxes, which realistically, can only go so far anyway. As it is, our programs cannot sustain and our mission cannot be accomplished without adequate resources.

The state's financial crisis is averted, and the GEA take back slowed, but it still continues. The financial plight of school districts has not diminished, it is deeper than ever due to the state's systematic withdrawal of funding. Without resources, you have cuts, which is why so many communities have seen cuts in school programs, ranging from remediation to summer school to guidance to buses. Schools are mostly people, so when programs go, people go, and it is estimated that more than 1700 jobs are gone. As often as possible this has been accomplished through retirements and attrition, but it still results in programs and services that are gone, and jobs that are no longer there.

Once they are cut, we can't cut them twice. Districts are running out of places for significant reductions. Districts are running out of fund balance savings. It looks great when you see a fund balance of \$6M in a district, until you realize, at the rate the district is drawing on those savings, that money won't last long.

With NYS now operating on a surplus and a financial windfall now in its coffers, we call for an end to GEA in this budget year. We call on NYS to step up to its Constitutional and moral obligation to adequately fund education for the children in this state.

Profiles of GEA impact on Erie County Districts are in this report. As you will see, some are more severe than others, but none is untouched, and none can sustain an ongoing stream of funding loss.

**This now is the State of Our Schools:**

Akron eliminated 42 positions, Alden eliminated 50, that's a lot of jobs for small communities.

Amherst reduced teacher aides, library aides, teacher assistants, custodial and clerical help, for a total of \$2.6M in district cuts, while at the same time negotiating a \$1M wage freeze.

Cheektowaga made \$2.8M in cuts, including more than 20 teaching positions – but actually has MORE staff because its special education population soared to more than 20% of its student population. Its fund balance is depleted.

Cheektowaga Sloan eliminated 18 jobs. Clarence cut 113 positions, Cleve Hill 20, Depew 29.6, East Aurora 20, Gowanda 14, Iroquois 36, Lancaster 62. Lackawanna 70. It sounds like sports scores, but it's not.

Ken-Ton cut 230 jobs, and Lake Shore cut 50 and their itemized lists of job eliminations take up more than three pages in this report. Sweet Home cut 73.8 positions, Maryvale 54.2.

North Collins is small and doesn't have much staff, but they cut 12.8 positions, and cut \$1.6M from their fund balance. West Seneca eliminated 250 positions.

Williamsville, through retirements and attrition, reduced its workforce to the tune of \$16M, along with general salary reductions of \$6.4M and reductions in programs like gifted education, co-curriculars, and languages other than English.

In Springville, the Superintendent was blunt, "We should survive for 2014-15, but if we remain on the dismal trajectory of GEA we anticipate a shortfall of \$1.6M in 2015-16, and \$3.5M in 2016-17. That's on top of laying off 45 FTEs two years ago... We're eating our reserves and we've got nowhere else to turn but to lay off more staff."

These are the jobs of people who taught, answered phones, compiled reports, coached kids, drove kids, cleaned our buildings, mowed our lawns and ran our schools. Even when jobs are eliminated through retirements and attrition, they are still jobs that are gone and not there for others. And the people who once had them are no longer there for the kids they once served.

That is the state of our schools after five years of GEA.

Lynda Quick will now offer additional perspectives ...

**Lynda Quick ...**

Lynda introduces **Scott Johnson ...**

Jane thanks **Scott**, then moves to the legislator comment section of the program:

We have several legislators with us today who have pledged their support to retain state funding and support of our schools.

I would like to first ask **Sen. Patrick Gullivan** to speak ...

**Sen. Mark Grisanti**

**Sen. Tim Kennedy**

**Assembly representative Jane Corwin**

**Assembly representative Michael Kearns**

**Assembly representative Sean Ryan**

**Assembly representative Robin Schimminger**

At end, Jane thanks all and reminds all that we are all communicators in our various roles and the information from this report and from the speakers today provides data and narrative for us to communicate to our school-communities and elected officials the imperative of eliminating the GEA in this budget year.