

New York school budget votes deepen attack on public education

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The campaign to dismantle public education in New York State has taken another step with the recent votes on proposed school district budgets for the coming year. The votes were held on May 15 in nearly 700 local districts, encompassing all but the state's five largest districts, including New York City, which have different mechanisms for adopting school budgets.

Over 96 percent of the districts adopted their proposed budgets, an all-time high. However, far from reflecting a high level of satisfaction with the state of public education in New York, the vote was conducted under severe constraints, presenting only bad options.

The votes in suburban, rural, town, and small city districts posed an impossible choice to working class and middle class residents—either undertake further cuts in their children's education, on top of those already enforced over the last several years, or raise local property taxes in areas suffering from years of economic decline.

This was the first year in which districts were operating under a state-imposed cap that prohibits increases of more than approximately 2 percent in local property taxes, a major source of revenue for public schools, without a 60 percent "super majority." The legislation was proposed by Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo and adopted by the state Legislature, composed of a Republican-controlled Senate and a Democratic-controlled Assembly.

Cuomo had promoted the tax cap as a solution to significant increases in local property taxes in recent years. High property taxes impose substantial burdens on working class and middle class residents suffering the effects of the economic crisis and are, therefore, widely unpopular. Cuomo championed the tax cap in an attempt to curry favor with voters and mask the negative effects of large budget cuts in education and

other social programs over the last few years.

The governor hailed the high rate of budget adoption this year as indicating the success of his policy in imposing "fiscal discipline".

"At one point, there is no more money, and that's where we are now," said Cuomo. "The answer is not 'put your hand in the pocket of the taxpayer' anymore."

What Cuomo failed to mention was that the previous tax increases were in large part forced on local districts due to years of under-funding by the state, as confirmed by a state court ruling in 2006, compounded by drastic reductions in state aid over the last three years. Although the current state budget included an \$805 million increase in state aid to public education, state aid remains \$1.1 billion below what it was in the 2008-2009 school year.

In recent years, therefore, local school districts have been forced to use a combination of drastic program and staff cuts along with drawing on emergency reserves in the attempt to compensate for the gross inadequacy of state support. The compounded effects of state budget cuts and the new tax caps have pushed the districts to the point where provision of even the most basic education to students is on the brink of collapse.

The director of the New York State Association of School Business Officials commented, "Although an overwhelming number of school districts won their votes, it was Pyrrhic victory in terms of the losses of educational staff and programs needed to achieve these victories. A few more rounds of these types of budget victories and there will be nothing left of our schools."

New York State Council of School Superintendents Executive Director Robert Reidy is quoted as saying that the use of reserve funds and other stopgap measures by most districts this year to stay within the

tax cap limit have just about been exhausted so that the crisis will be even worse next year. State Education Commissioner John King warned that some districts will face “educational insolvency” in the next year or two.

According to the New York State School Boards Association, districts statewide used \$1.45 billion from reserve funds last year and will use an additional \$1.3 billion this year. That leaves a balance of \$1.2 billion. At the current rate of decline, therefore, the remainder of the reserves will be completely exhausted next year.

Data collected by the New York State Association of School Business Officials based on a survey of 403 school districts, out of a total of nearly 700, reveals that in the coming school year 64 percent of these districts will eliminate a total of 4,263 positions, including teachers and support staff. In addition, more than half will increase class sizes because of staff cuts. Electives courses and extracurricular activities, including sports, will be reduced or eliminated in 40 percent of the districts. These reductions come on top of ones already implemented over the last three years.

Despite the state-imposed tax cap holding districts to an approximately 2 percent annual increase in local property taxes unless voters approve a higher increase by a 60 percent “super-majority,” budgets were approved in over 60 percent of the districts that proposed tax increases above the cap, indicating the value that people place on public education. Districts where attempts to override the cap were unsuccessful have two options—either adopt a reduced budget within the limit, or make a second attempt to pass the higher tax in a revote on June 19. If the latter attempt fails, the state law prohibits any tax increase at all. Such districts would then be forced to make even deeper cuts in educational programs and staffing levels.

The reaction to this gutting of public education by New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), the state’s largest teachers union, and other education advocacy groups is to oppose the tax cap, advocating a return to previous conditions under which tax increases should only need a simple majority (i.e., 50 percent) to be adopted. The union spent \$2 million on a television and radio campaign to advocate a “Yes” vote on school budgets. NYSUT is also considering a lawsuit against the state because of inequity in funding between relatively rich and poor districts.

School administrators (New York State School Boards Association) are advocating a loosening of state mandates and regulations, pertaining to such areas as transportation and special education, as a solution to the budget squeeze. In other words, they want more flexibility to cut programs and degrade the quality of education even further.

All of these proposals accept the proposition that “there is no money”; that public education along with all social services must be sacrificed to the need of the corporate and financial elite for ever-increasing profits regardless of the consequences to workers and young people.



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