

2015 Issues Brief: Funding our Schools

This year's Executive budget demands that the legislature choose between two unacceptable options before adopting a new State budget; a state aid increase which at \$1.1 billion is insufficient to even maintain current school programs and a draconian "reform" agenda that in other times would be discussed following State budget adoption. Such choices are unacceptable and possibly unconstitutional. Working with the Educational Conference Board, NYS PTA has demanded that the Governor separate these two issues, release proposed state aid details immediately and delay discussion of a program reforms until after a new budget has been adopted.

The Governor continues his portrayal of New York schools as high spending and low performance, citing graduation statistics that have more to do with experiences of earlier generations and little to do with the performance of today's schools. New York has traditionally invested heavily in education but more as a result of choices by local communities than by the State itself. New York also faces greater challenges than other states with far greater diversity, more poverty and issues related to immigration and language.

In the past several years, New York State's public schools have grappled with the combined challenges of severely diminished resources, changing demographics, increasing rates of poverty, demands for expanded pre-kindergarten services, growing populations of students of children who struggle with the English language and unprecedented challenges to prepare a new generation to succeed in a global society. As we turn the corner toward an improved fiscal condition with projections of \$2 billion state surpluses, it is imperative that we recognize these new challenges while demanding that the State honor past commitments and constitutional obligations to adequately fund our schools. The commitments we seek are not merely dollars but strategies that fairly deploy those dollars so that educational quality depends more on our collective efforts than the zip code of the school.

We can successfully address these issues but not in an environment where half of our districts receive less state support than they did in 2008 or in a property tax cap environment where the state is still \$5.7 billion short of honoring its commitments to assure resources where property taxes cannot. To remedy this situation, the state must support the \$1.9 billion state aid investment proposed by the NYS Educational Conference Board or similar proposals offered by the NYS Board of Regents and others that would:

- Eliminate the remaining \$1 billion Gap Elimination Adjustment first imposed in 2010 by no later than the 2016-17 school year
- Accelerate phase-in of \$4.7 billion in foundation aid that was originally scheduled for completion in 2011
- Honor 2014 commitments to expand pre-kindergarten programs statewide
- Fund Regents agenda to establish new and creative pathways to high school graduation
- Support a growing population of English Language Learners by fully funding mandates associated with part 154 of NYS Commissioner's Regulations and reinstating funding once made available through Limited English Proficiency (LEP) aid
- Reinstate current year growth aid to recognize the obligation for school districts to address unanticipated enrollment spikes, often the result of unaccompanied minors seeking to escape intolerable conditions in their home countries
- Reject Education Tax Credit proposals whose public cost would divert funds from traditional public education and place funding decisions in the hands of individuals and corporations rather than publically elected and appointed officials
- Reject proposals to increase numbers of charter schools until outstanding commitments to adequately fund traditional public schools have been met and until existing charters have clearly demonstrated the public value of State and local investment in their operations
- Adopt sensible adjustments to the property tax cap including elimination of the current requirement of a 60% super majority vote to exceed the 2% cap

When the state has moved from coping with deficits to contemplating annual surpluses, it ought to first recall that it has past commitments and new obligations to support on behalf of our students. It would be irresponsible for the legislature not to honor these priorities.