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School officials trying to make do with less money

Many districts likely to increase taxes

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NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Tough times have put local school officials on the spot.

They face deep state aid cuts after several years of big increases and are struggling to maintain existing classroom and sports programs that parents have come to expect.

At the same time, many districts are likely to raise property taxes substantially just to keep — or even reduce — those services, angering hard-pressed taxpayers who would like to see schools tighten their belts after state aid increased nearly 50 percent over the past five years.

The Orchard Park schools, for example, are ruling out new instructional programs next school year.

But even with that hold-the-line approach, Superintendent Joan Thomas anticipates an increase in the property tax levy of as much as 8.5 percent.

“I have to go to the taxpayers and say: ‘You’ve got to help,’ ” she said.

The story is the same throughout the region, as school boards grapple with Gov. David A. Paterson’s proposed budget, which would cut school aid by \$49.2 million — or 4.7 percent — in Erie County and by \$12.7 million — or 4.9 percent — in Niagara County.

Buffalo Public Schools officials, who rely on the state for 80 percent of their funding and do not have the authority to levy taxes, start budget deliberations with a projected \$52 million budget shortfall.

“As a parent, this is terrifying,” said Samuel Radford III, a member of the district’s parent coordinating council. “In the short term, this is going to be a major setback.”

Paterson said the cuts are necessary because of the “grim reality” of the state’s budget crisis.

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Yet even with a proposed 3.3 percent statewide cut in assistance, school aid still would total \$20.7 billion next year, the governor also emphasized.

That's a 42 percent increase over 2003-04, well above inflation.

"I am assured in the knowledge that, even after these actions, New York will still have one of the best-funded education systems in the nation," Paterson said.

But pressure for new programs continues.

Deferring programs

In Williamsville, parents have been pushing for a girls ice hockey program and high school instruction in Mandarin Chinese.

Earlier this month, the Board of Education decided to defer any new academic or athletic programs and to concentrate instead on trying to maintain existing offerings.

Helen Meosky, a parent ice hockey advocate, said supporters consider girls hockey a federally mandated extension of the long-existing boys team and not a new program. In addition, she said, it would cost only about \$20,000.

"It's bringing the girls up to par," said Meosky, who stressed that she understands the board's dilemma. "It's a matter of equality."

The Lake Shore schools may proceed with previous plans to hire a part-time teacher to staff a high school finance academy but will likely consider cuts in sports, clubs and other extracurricular activities, said Superintendent Jeffrey R. Rabey.

"We're going to be using a scalpel when we make our reductions, rather than a chain saw," he said. "With all the progress we've made, we don't want to go backward."

School districts are considering possible cuts in Advanced Placement classes, interscholastic sports and pupil transportation, along with increases in class sizes, said Donald A. Ogilvie, superintendent of Erie 1 Board of Cooperative Education Services.

"Try to preserve the basic structure of what you have and cut at the margins," Ogilvie advises. "What are popular programs? What are important programs? And what are vital programs?"

Feeling the pain

But many taxpayers are frustrated with what they hear from educators.

At a recent public meeting of the Lancaster Central School District, retiree Lee Chowaniec urged the School Board to rein in spending when it negotiates contracts later this year with its teachers and service personnel.

"It is the spending that is out of control," he said. "I am feeling the pain. What pain is the school district ready to accept?"

Even parents who are highly supportive of their school districts are asking those same questions, noting that state aid to education increased nearly 50 percent between 2003 and 2008.

Susan Wrotny, the district representative for the Parent-Teacher Organization at Lancaster's Court Street Elementary School, said the school system is first-rate, efficient and open in its dealings with the public.

But Wrotny, whose family pays more than \$700 a month in health insurance premiums, said at a recent public

forum that the district's benefits package is too generous.

"I think the benefits are a little over the top," she said. "We pay for our benefits and then we pay for yours."

With expenses rising and revenues declining, districts are putting their operations under a microscope.

Thomas will propose that Orchard Park save \$90,000 by consolidating bus routes and \$18,000 by washing school buses only half as often as it does now.

Also, she said, special-education students now in expensive outside placements might be brought back to district schools.

The North Tonawanda School Board this month voted to establish a high school boys varsity hockey team but only after receiving assurances that it could withdraw from the league without penalty if it can't come up with \$33,790 to run the team.

Fears in city

In Buffalo, Radford, the parent activist, is afraid that the \$52 million budget gap will reverse recent improvements, including efforts to establish parent facilitators at city schools.

"The reality is, we're not going to be able to defend those gains," he said. "We're going to go back to a survival mode."

Budget concerns surfaced on the Buffalo Board of Education earlier this month when Superintendent James A. Williams announced the appointment of Marta Clark as director of employment services, a \$75,000-a-year post that is included in the district's current Human Resources Department budget.

"The department still works with paper and pencil," said Gary M. Crosby, the district's chief financial and operations officer. "There are things in boxes waiting to be filed away. We're evaluating the merits of each [hiring] request. In certain cases we're at the point where we can't afford not to do it."

North District School Board member Catherine Nugent-Panepinto objected, saying the appointment should be put off in light of the district's projected budget gap.

"If records have to stay in boxes for a while so we don't have to increase class sizes, they'll just have to stay there," Panepinto said.

Panepinto and board members Ralph Hernandez and Pamela D. Perry-Cahill then cast the "no" votes in a 6-3 board decision to spend \$47,200 to have two media firms produce promotional and instructional materials.

Hernandez said the contracts would be justified in better economic times but "don't even come close" to the need to save money to minimize anticipated cuts in staff and classroom programs.

The State Legislature traditionally adds money to the governor's state aid package, so the cuts might not be as bad as they appear now.

Also, there are indications that the U. S. Congress and President Obama might include school aid in the federal economic stimulus package, which could ease the pinch on local schools. But that remains uncertain, and school officials aren't counting on it.

"We're playing the worst-case scenario," said Rabey, the Lake Shore superintendent. "We've got to go into this with eyes open."

Anticipating several years of tight budgets, school officials are reluctant to deplete their reserve funds in one shot.

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