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NYS School Superintendents: Grateful for voters' support for budgets with "no easy choices"

The State Education Department now reports that New York voters approved 92.4 percent of proposed school district budgets yesterday. School districts outside the "Big 5" cities (Buffalo, New York, Rochester, Syracuse, and Yonkers) are required to submit proposed operating budgets for voter approval every year on the third Tuesday in May.

"There were no easy choices for superintendents and school boards in putting together proposed budgets this year – or for voters," said Robert Bradley, interim executive director of the New York State Council of School Superintendents. "Given how hard those choices were makes the voters' support even more impressive."

Bradley added, "Preliminary information suggests that voter turnout was up sharply in many districts from last year. With the difficult choices we were asking voters to support, we are especially grateful that more New Yorkers decided it was important to support their schools."

Bradley noted that a complication this year was uncertainty over state aid, one of the two major revenue sources for school districts. With the state budget unresolved, most districts budgeted based on the Governor's proposal, which recommends cuts in aid averaging over 5 percent. But school leaders tried to limit the impact of state cuts on their local taxpayers, by holding down spending.

Statewide, districts proposed spending increases averaging 1.4 percent, down from 2.3 percent a year ago. Approximately 30 percent of districts proposed cutting spending from current year levels.

Roughly 70 percent of school spending goes to personnel (salaries and benefits). To hold down spending while accommodating required cost increases, some districts had to make significant staffing reductions. A February survey by the Council and the State School Boards Association found that districts outside New York City anticipated laying off 6,300 teachers, or more than 4 percent of their teaching faculty.

Proposed tax increases averaged 3.2 percent, up from 2.1 percent in 2009-10. State aid increased by 1.9 percent a year ago, while most districts reportedly have budgeted for the coming year based upon the Governor's proposed cut of 5.1 percent. For perspective, proposed tax increases averaged 8.2 percent the last time state aid was cut, in 2003.

"School leaders made the best choices they could for the students and taxpayers they serve," said Bradley. "Now we hope that the Governor and Legislature will act soon on a state budget that

more...

restores some aid to schools. Aid restorations could still help districts reduce either tax increases or layoffs, or both.”

Districts whose budgets were not approved now may either adopt a contingency budget or submit a second budget proposal for consideration by voters on June 15. If the second proposal is not approved by voters, districts must then adopt a contingency budget under which most spending is capped at a figure tied to inflation. The cap for 2010-11 is zero.

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