



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 10, 2017

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New York’s public schools are “losing ground” as financial gains are not keeping up with growing student needs, superintendents’ survey reports

ALBANY – Modest improvements in the financial condition of some of New York’s public schools are not keeping pace with growing needs among the students they serve, warns [a new report](#) released today by the New York State Council of School Superintendents.

“Our survey does show improvement in the financial condition of some school systems,” said Charles Dedrick, executive director of the Council. “But superintendents are reporting increasing needs among the students their districts serve and those needs are growing at a faster rate than improvements in financial condition.”

Most strikingly, the Council’s survey reports a sharp increase among superintendents in the priority they give to improving student mental health services.

The share of superintendents who would make improving mental health, counseling, social work or related services a priority for new funding climbed 17 points in one year, from 35 percent in the Council’s 2016 survey to 52 percent this year.

Improving mental health services was the most widely cited priority among superintendents, who were asked to rank the top three priorities if their district were to receive funding beyond what would be needed to maintain current services and satisfy mandates. In the prior six annual Council surveys, increasing extra academic help for struggling students was the top-ranked priority.

In the same vein, “capacity to help students with non-academic needs, including health and mental health” was cited as a “significant problem” for their schools by 45 percent of superintendents, more than any other item.

In open-ended comments, superintendents commonly attribute growing mental health needs to poverty and economic insecurity among school families and to the influence of technology upon students, including social media.

For example, in a comment submitted to the survey, a Mohawk Valley superintendent observed,

While the funding and educational models of our schools have largely stayed the same, the needs of students and communities have continued to increase. We cannot simply maintain the status quo due to the increasing mental health, special education, and ELL [English Language Learner] needs while the fiscal conditions and employment prospects of our communities continue to worsen.

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For the third year in a row, more superintendents reported that their districts' financial condition had improved rather than worsened, by 24 percent to 13 percent. But the largest number, 62 percent, reported no change in financial condition.

The share of superintendents reporting improvement in their district's financial condition has never risen above 31 percent in any of the Council's seven annual financial surveys, going back to 2011.

Similarly, more superintendents anticipated that their district budgets this year would have a positive impact on specific student services, such as core instruction at each school level, extra academic help, advanced classes, and counseling, social work, or mental health services. But never in the seven annual surveys has a majority of superintendents statewide reported improvement in any area.

Robert Lowry, deputy director of the Council for advocacy, research and communications observed, "State aid increases over the past few years have improved or at least stabilized the financial condition of most school districts. But many have not made much progress in recovering from damage they suffered during the Great Recession and now they are struggling to help their students with problems that start outside of school."

For example, a Capital Region superintendent wrote,

We are still recovering from the 2008 economic downturn where staffing and programmatic cuts were extremely deep. We are trying to add back a little each year, but still well below where we were in 2008. This has created huge inequities in available student opportunities compared with our wealthier suburban neighbors. While we are getting by financially, we are not back to pre-2008 staffing levels, even ten years later with enrollment levels remaining roughly the same. This opportunity gap is a loss for our students and their futures.

There was a nine-point increase in the percentage of superintendents saying they are optimistic in thinking ahead three years or so about the ability of their schools to fund adequate services, from 20 to 29 percent. But 70 percent of superintendents remain pessimistic, including 7 percent who said their schools cannot fund adequate services now. Districts in this group are predominantly small, rural, and higher in student poverty.

Asked what factor causes them the greatest concern in thinking about their schools' financial prospects, 50 percent of superintendents cited the possibility of inadequate state aid, 16 percent chose the impact of the tax cap, and 15 percent selected increasing needs of students, up from 10 percent in 2016.

The survey was conducted online between July 25th and August 21st. It was completed by 322 superintendents, a response rate of 47 percent.

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The New York State Council of School Superintendents is a professional and advocacy organization with over a century of service to school superintendents and assistant superintendents in New York State. The Council provides more than 800 members with professional development opportunities, publications and personal support while advocating for public education and the superintendency.