



LOWER HUDSON EDUCATION COALITION
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2024 NYS Advocacy Agenda

Since 1976, the Lower Hudson Education Coalition (LHEC) has been a leading regional public education advocacy voice and resource for the 77 public school districts in Dutchess, Putnam, Rockland, and Westchester counties. Our districts educate over 230,000 students and encompass more than 1.7 million community members.

Student Mental Health: *The increasing mental health needs of our students are a barrier to their academic learning and must be addressed within school walls and in the broader community.*

- Create an **expense-based aid for student mental health** services or contractual services provided in a school setting.
- Provide community behavioral health providers with ongoing **cost of living increases** to meet the growing demand of students and families in need of mental health services.
- Continue to support provision of **universal school meals** for all community-eligible school districts. The additional support provided in the 2023-24 school year has been greatly appreciated by students and school districts alike.

School Safety: *Security of school buildings continues to be a key issue that parents and building administrators worry about constantly. School districts face difficulties hiring staff to ensure security and deal effectively with young people in a protective role.*

- Ensure additional **flexible resources for school safety**, including funding for staffing, security upgrades, and training.
- Waive the **allowable salary cap** for retired police officers who work as school resource officers or school security.
- Establish a **new model for school security**, like New Jersey's Special Law Enforcement Officer (SLEO) model, where school security officers are hired directly by the district but are able to receive ongoing training and certification through local police departments and/or the State Police.
- Increase support for **cybersecurity** assistance and training for school districts.
- Require that county Boards of Elections **consult with local school districts before designating schools as polling places.**

Foundation Aid Formula and Regional Cost Index: *Along with the State's commitment to fully fund the Foundation Aid formula, updated data inputs and adjustments to the current formula would ensure adequate and representative state aid to school districts.*

- Update **school district data in the Foundation Aid formula** to ensure that increasing student needs, changes in enrollment, recent poverty data, appropriate regional costs, and special education needs are reflected. The outdated data used in the 2007 formula does not reflect changes in student demographics and increased cost of living in the Hudson Valley.
- **Establish a mechanism to regularly re-evaluate and update the Foundation Aid formula** to reflect nuanced poverty measures, the true costs of educating ENL and special needs students, accurate regional cost indices, and the effect of the tax levy cap on the community portion of school funding.
- Amend the **Regional Cost Index of the Lower Hudson Valley to reflect the high cost of operating in the suburbs of NYC.** Either establish a new MTA Region to group the LHEC counties with NYC/Long Island, or create a Long Island/Hudson Valley region, like NYSED's ARPA grant calculation.
- **Maintain full funding** of current Foundation Aid formula with annual increases to recognize the ongoing inflationary costs that districts incur, and commit to fully funding an updated formula focused on the current needs of students in our state.

Tax Cap Revisions: *In 2011 when the Property Tax Cap was first enacted, school districts and local governments were promised mandate relief to facilitate the ability to comply with the tax cap. That has failed to materialize. A review of the tax levy cap formula and provisions is overdue since the legislation was passed in 2011.*

- Allow districts to **apply unused allowable tax levy** for three subsequent years to balance needs of schools & taxpayers.
- Amend the current formula to exempt **increases in pension contributions or health care costs** of more than 10% per year. Additionally, given current world events, we request that the State consider **exemptions for non-academic functions** of school districts – including school security and student mental health supports.
- Simplify the **tax cap formula** to address incongruities such as eliminating negative tax levy caps and reducing the impact of annual changes in the use of reserves or transfers to capital.
- Modify the tax levy cap calculation to **begin with inflation**, instead of CPI to a maximum of 2%.
- Account for enrollment growth in the calculation.
- Establish a **tax levy cap working group** to review the formula.

A joint project of the Westchester Putnam School Boards Association, the Rockland County School Boards Association, the Dutchess County School Boards Association and the Lower Hudson Council of School Superintendents

Mandate Relief and Transparency: *A thorough review of existing mandates and increased transparency prior to the enactment of new mandates would assist school districts in managing the significant cost burdens of compliance. In the current inflationary environment, reducing requirements on school districts will assist with cost control when prices are expected to continue to rise.*

- Require a **complete fiscal note**, prepared by a NYS actuary, added to each education-related bill, prior to passing legislation.
- Establish an **'Education Mandate Relief Redesign Team'** similar to efforts undertaken by the State in 2011. This redesign team should be tasked with reviewing ways to reduce the costs of unfunded mandates.
- Increase **flexibility in use of reserve funds** to improve fiscal planning, including permitting reserves for long-term costs such as other post-employment benefits (OPEB).
- Support A.1279/S.4866 creating a **fund for payouts under the Child Victim's Act** beyond insurance available for districts.
- Continue and enhance provisions of the ability for **remote meeting participation** to allow all school board members to participate remotely on occasions when they cannot be available in person.

Special Act Public School Districts (SASD): *SASDs are public school districts that provide specialized services to some of NYS's most challenged students whose individual needs cannot be met in their home district. Measures are needed to ensure the fiscal and programmatic stability of Special Act public school districts.*

- Promptly revise the **tuition rate-setting process** based on the ongoing study results.
- Award SASDs an **interim plus tuition rate annually** on July 1st, to permit budgeting with approved growth rates.
- **Eliminate the direct/indirect cost screen**, or at least, adjust **security costs** to be included as direct care costs.
- Ensure that **interest or investment income** accrued through reserve fund not be considered offsetting revenue.

Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES): *The BOCES provide services and programs primarily to component districts within their region that would be cost-ineffective for individual districts to undertake. BOCES are a key source of educational programs in career and technical education (CTE), special education and adult education throughout the state.*

- Increase the **salary cap** for career and technical education (CTE) teachers.
- Ensure BOCES provides a CoSer for **community college or dual enrollment tuition** to support students' entry to college.
- Permit a two-week window in the timing of component district **BOCES budget votes**.
- Permit BOCES to hold **funds in reserve**, similar to other school districts, to help with long-term planning.

Climate Resiliency: *School districts want to ensure that their facilities and infrastructure are environmentally friendly and can withstand the demands of a changing climate. Aging buildings need improvements to allow for a comfortable and safe environment with the probability of increased heat and flooding, while districts look to comply with the zero-emission bus mandate.*

- Provide enhanced funding to support capital projects improving **climate resiliency or energy efficiency of schools**.
- Direct NYSED to provide planning, technical support, and funding for the transition to **zero-emissions school buses**. Funds should be made available for all planning and design, reworking, or adding space for charging and storing electric buses, requiring utilities to promptly ensure availability of electricity and hookups, remapping bus routes, training for maintenance and technical staff, ensuring roads and emergency staff are prepared for the transition, and purchasing zero-emission buses.

Pre-Kindergarten Growth and Success: *Ensuring all preschool-age children have access to a high-quality, affordable pre-K program is a worthy goal. Adequate state funding is critical in public school districts where a clear need has been identified.*

- **Consolidate pre-K grant programs** into a single annual funding stream that can be deployed for 4-year-old programs and 3-year-old programs, and amend the current law to include a **cost inflation factor** in per pupil allocations.
- Increase **flexibility** in the use of pre-K aid to ensure that districts can productively use these funds to support early learners.
- Continue increasing **pre-K aid funding** available to ensure additional students can benefit from quality programs.
- Amend the current law to make **pre-K transportation an aidable expense** for school districts, like K-12 transportation.
- Continue to allow school districts to determine the **local need for public pre-K** based on the availability of private programs and the physical space and faculty limitations of the district.

School Calendar: *With increased flexibility available during the pandemic, school districts are looking to manage school calendars to focus on the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, and to allow for efficient operations.*

- Permit flexibility in the hour and day requirements of the **aidable school calendar** to allow for earlier starts to the school year, providing additional holidays in districts with diverse communities, & experimenting with alternative calendar options.

Employee Retention and Recruitment: *As NYS considers amendments to civil service procedures in the coming budget year, school districts are looking at how the process affects employee recruitment and retention in a school district setting.*

- Offer civil service **tests on a continuous**, or at least more frequent, basis.
- **Standardize grading metrics** across all NYS jurisdictions.
- **Modernize test questions** to be more relevant and solicit recommendations from experts in the field when drafting exams.
- **Simplify the part-time job requirements** and make them non-competitive to allow for more hiring flexibility.
- Allow for **electronic recruitment** to alleviate administrative costs and increase efficiency.
- **Expand the number of eligible employees** for appointments to a Rule of 5 (from current Rule of 3).

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