

2.3% FOR SCHOOLS

■ **Cuomo includes \$64M** education aid increase for LI

■ **Hike is less** than 2017-18, but legislators can modify it

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ALBANY — Nagging economic worries are reflected in the state's school-aid proposal for Long Island that includes a modest \$64.3 million increase in operating funds for next year — a 2.3 percent boost.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's plan for the 2018-19 school year, rolled out in his annual budget message on Tuesday, would raise operating aid in Nassau and Suffolk counties to a total \$2.86 billion.

That is enough to cover about one-fourth of overall school spending in the two-county region, but experts said it is not sufficient to fully meet rising costs of teacher pensions and other big expenses.

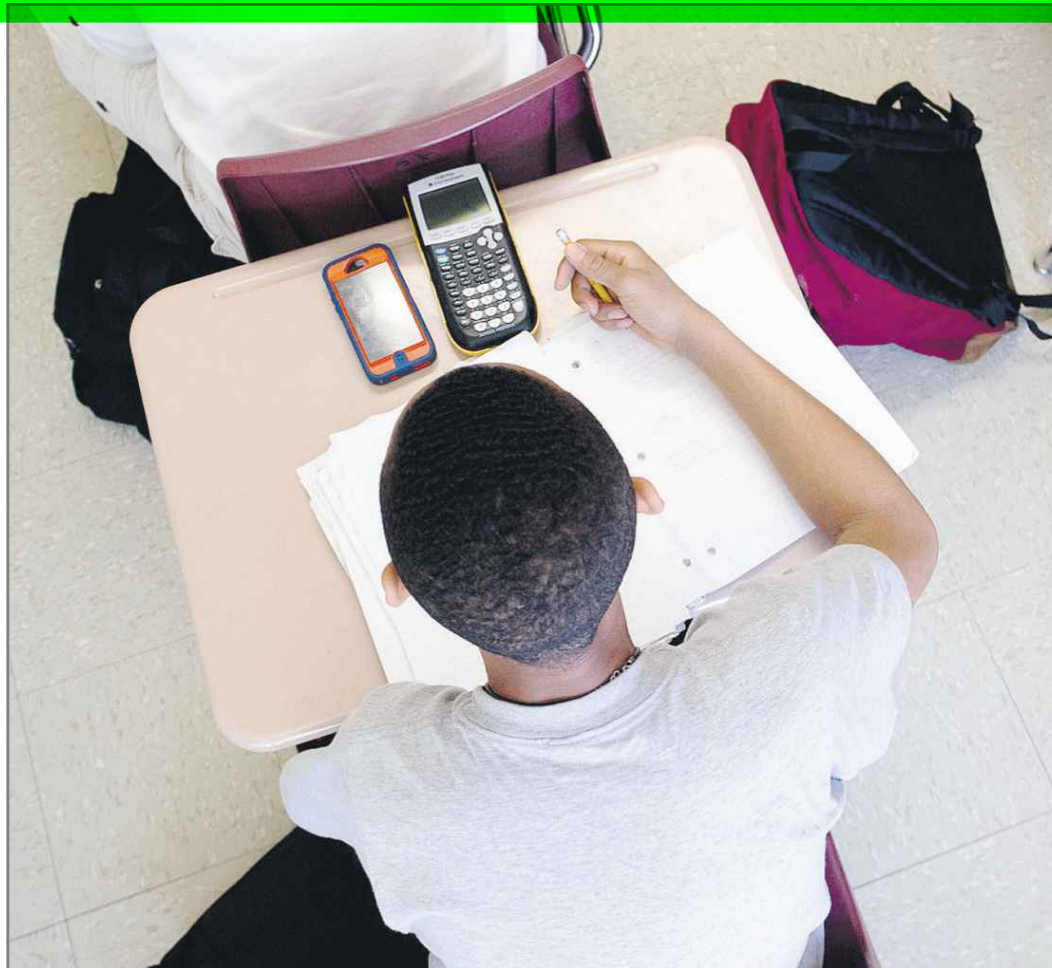
"My initial reaction is that we're pleased there's money for education," said Julie Lutz, chief operating officer of the regional Eastern Suffolk BOCES district and a leading school-finance analyst. "We're still looking at all the proposals to see where the money is being distributed."

The legislature typically tacks more money onto gubernatorial proposals before the state's budget is approved in April. Some local legislators this week vowed to do just that.

"As a teacher and a mom, I'll be standing up for Long Island families to fight for more money for our schools," said Assemb. Christine Pellegrino (D-West Islip).

Proponents of a larger aid package noted that school systems have become far more dependent upon Albany's help since the Cuomo administration first imposed tax-cap restrictions on districts' authority to raise revenues from local property taxes in 2012.

The statewide baseline cap for 2018-19, released Tuesday by the state comptroller's office, will be 2 percent. Actual increases in tax collections im-



A looming state budget deficit has restricted money for school aid in Cuomo's 2018-19 plan.

posed by districts may end up being more or less than 2 percent, depending on local factors such as bond issues to fund school reconstruction or repairs, which are exempt from the cap.

New York State has an election year in 2018 — traditionally a time when elected officials open the spigots and let the financial assistance flow.

However, this year's aid offer for the Island's 124 districts is down from the \$75.3 million expansion in new operating funds that the governor put forward at this time last year, and the \$105.7 million he proposed the year before.

District-by-district figures extracted by Newsday from the state data released Tuesday night show a mixed picture on the Island.

Some 20 districts lost at least small amounts of operating aid, while other systems enjoyed

gains of more than 6 percent or 7 percent.

Average increases in operating aid were 2.61 percent in Nassau County, 2.12 percent in Suffolk and 2.15 percent statewide.

Newsday's calculations focus on operating funds, because those are widely considered a more meaningful measure of what a district receives than aid for school construction and renovation, which may or may not go to a district in a given year, depending on whether the work is completed then.

Both Cuomo and state Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli have predicted financial troubles ahead, citing a looming state budget deficit and changes in federal tax law and health spending that

are likely to exert more financial pressure. "In many ways, this is going to be the most challenging budget we do," the governor said Tuesday.

Some lawmakers and analysts suggested the fiscal picture may not be quite as bleak as the governor indicated.

"That's questionable," Assemb. Brian Curran (R-Lynbrook) said.

Michael Borges, executive director of the New York State Association of School Business Officials, cited reports that statewide income-tax receipts rose during the last three weeks of December. Borges called the growth "dramatic."

The governor, in his budget message, characterized his proposed \$769 million hike in statewide school aid — an increase of 3 percent — as "evidence of a strong commitment to education."

State aid to schools

Here's how funds for operating assistance to Long Island's 124 school districts stack up in Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's proposed budget for 2018-19.

Funds for building aid and money allocated to districts required to perform certain community services were not included.

Nassau County:
\$1,034,332,687
increase of 2.61 percent

Suffolk County:
\$1,828,337,006
increase of 2.12 percent

Long Island:
\$2,862,669,693
increase of 2.3 percent

Statewide:
\$22,641,598,796
increase of 2.15 percent

Supporters noted that the 3 percent raise was substantially more than most other state programs got, and also far more than the statewide rise in personal incomes.

"You know, I think it's a very good starting point," said David Flatley, superintendent of Carle Place schools and president of the Nassau County Council of School Superintendents. "I understand the state is facing economic difficulties."

The governor's statewide package included support for programs, such as expanded prekindergarten classes, that not all districts offer.

Some veteran educators, as they reviewed figures on Wednesday, recalled the adage that all politics is local. The point, they said, is that what matters with school aid is the impact on each individual district.

Joseph Dragone, assistant superintendent for business for the Roslyn schools, noted that his district would lose more than 2 percent in operating aid next year based on the governor's plan.

"A reduction in operating aid of 2 percent when we're capped on the revenue side is not going to be helpful," Dragone said. "Somehow, it doesn't add up."

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