

A pledge to boost school aid

■ **Cuomo plan** will see hike, LI lawmaker tells educators

■ **Rising costs** of teacher pensions seen as a concern

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A key Long Island lawmaker said Saturday that the State Legislature would “definitely” expand a school-aid package proposed by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, though he indicated the increase could be a modest one.

State Senate Majority Leader John J. Flanagan (R-East Northport) also disappointed some educators attending a breakfast conference in Middle Island, when he declined to offer help in authorizing reserve funds to pay rising costs of teacher pensions.

Flanagan, addressing 370 educators at Longwood Middle School, said that Cuomo, a Democrat, already had put forward a financial-assistance plan that was relatively generous, given the fiscal pressures now facing the state.

“The governor deserves credit for putting \$769 million in his budget for education,” the majority leader said. “He didn’t have to do that.”

The annual Longwood meeting, which brings school superin-



Regent Roger Tilles, right, with Anthony DeSimone and Arielle Desir, of Longwood High, at Saturday's legislative breakfast.

tendents and board members together with state and federal lawmakers, provides a regional kick-off for the annual school budget season.

Later, Flanagan, in answer to a reporter's question, said the amount of money proposed by the governor would be increased, though he wouldn't say

by how much. This follows a familiar pattern in the annual budget process, where governors present lowball figures and legislators later raise the ante.

A final aid package is to be approved April 1, along with the rest of the state budget.

Cuomo's call last month for a \$769 million hike in statewide

school aid would bring total annual school assistance to about \$26.4 billion. Operating aid to individual school districts, including those in Nassau and Suffolk counties, would rise an average 2.3 percent.

That's less than the governor offered last year. One compensation is that districts next year will be allowed to raise more money through local property taxes, because the state's baseline cap restriction on taxation will go up to 2 percent — the highest limit since 2013-14.

School superintendents across the state had hoped that lawmakers would provide additional help, by allowing districts to set aside extra cash reserves to meet the costs of pensions covering teachers, guidance counselors and other professional school staffers.

Flanagan, however, told the breakfast conference that he thought Senate colleagues were “not comfortable” with taking such a step during the current legislative session. The majority leader explained that the Senate had approved such a measure previously, but the governor had vetoed it.

Lars Clemensen, president of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association, who also attended the conference, voiced disappointment. A teacher pension fund reserve, he said, would provide

districts with greater predictability in their budgeting, because it would give them a financial cushion in years when pension costs rise.

“Call it a shock absorber,” said Clemensen, who is superintendent of Hampton Bays schools.

Pension costs are expected to rise about 10 percent next year, after three years of reductions, because analysts project lower growth in future pension stock earnings.

Another veteran lawmaker who appeared at the conference, Assemb. Michael Fitzpatrick (R-St. James), said the state should look for ways to reduce costs of pensions and other school expenses, especially in light of increasing fiscal pressures.

Cuomo and lawmakers face the need to eliminate a state budget deficit next year. Moreover, passage in December of a federal tax bill reducing deductions for state and local taxes has many experts warning of a probable rise in public resistance to higher school taxes.

Fitzpatrick said one way to reduce pension costs — and thus, school taxes — would be to establish defined-contribution pension plans similar to the 401(k) for newly hired teachers.

“We've got to give taxpayers some breathing room,” Fitzpatrick said.

Nominations open for Newsday's Top Workplaces on LI

Newsday Staff

If you feel energized by your workplace, consider nominating your employer as one of the Top Workplaces on Long Island.

Newsday has partnered with Energage, a research firm that conducts surveys into organizational health, to identify workplaces on Long Island where employees feel their work is appreciated; where they identify with the company's goals and vision; and where they have confidence in their leadership, among other factors.

Any organization with 50 or

more employees in Nassau and Suffolk counties can participate. Employers can be public or private, for profit or not for profit, governmental organizations or businesses.

Nominations, which are due by March 16, can be made at this website: newsday.com/nominateworkplace.

Employees of participating companies will anonymously complete a 24-question, five-

minute survey. There is no cost to companies or employees to participate.

Employees can fill out a survey only once, and worker participation at a company must be widespread to be considered for a Top Workplace.

Energage, which is based in Exton, Pennsylvania, was founded in 2006. It surveys more than 2.5 million workers a year and weighs the responses against its national data to determine which companies are Top Workplaces. Energage is working with media companies to produce local

rankings in 47 regions.

Newsday will publish a ranked list of top workplaces in October, in three categories: small, medium and large. Some of the top-ranking companies will be profiled in that section.

Newsday will also hold a celebration dinner for companies that make the list.

Companies that participate get summary information about their results from Energage, allowing them to assess an important part of their organizational health. Those that make the list of top workplaces have a chance to promote their

workplace culture and attract motivated recruits, as well as boosting morale and retaining talented employees.

“The Top Workplaces award is not a popularity contest,” said Doug Claffey, CEO of Energage. “Organizations must meet high standards in the eyes of their employees. People often mistakenly assume it's all about pay, fancy perks and benefits. It's really about organizational health, and that starts with good leadership. Having a good workplace is essential for hiring, retaining and motivating talent.”



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