

Backward logic of tax cap opponents

OPINION

Those who want it gone don't concede how they could hurt poor school districts



Lane Filler

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When the New York State United Teachers union works to abolish the state's property tax cap, Wyandanch is the kind of district the organization says it's fighting for. Wyandanch, struggling with a budget deficit this year, is the poorest school district in Suffolk County in both property wealth and taxable income. About 87 percent of students are low-income, and 98 percent are minorities.

The tax cap, NYSUT president Andy Pallotta said in a blog post this month, "hurts our poorest districts the most, placing the most severe limits on their ability to raise funds and punishing parents and other taxpayers in low-wealth districts who try to provide more funding for their children."

This liberal teachers union is the backbone of the Demo-

cratic Party in New York. And it says the tax cap makes it too hard to impose large tax increases on poor people. Can NYSUT really not hear how poorly reasoned that sounds?

The tax cap limits increases in district levies to the lesser of 2 percent or the rate of inflation each year, barring a 60 percent vote to pierce it. The cap was enacted in 2011 and expires every few years. This year, suburban legislators and Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo want to make it permanent, while NYSUT fights to keep it temporary or watered down.

A 2015 Siena College Research Institute poll found that 73 percent of voters supported the cap, and it's not surprising. School district tax increases on Long Island averaged 6 percent a year for the decade before the cap was in place, a rate at which taxes would have doubled every 12 years. Hikes have averaged less than a third of that since.

Now let's look at Wyandanch. Has that poverty and the tax cap led to low per-pupil



Residents, students and employees of the Wyandanch school district attend a school board meeting in December.

MICHAEL OWENS

spending? No, Wyandanch will spend nearly \$26,000 apiece on its 2,763 students this year, right around the Long Island median and double the national average. That's largely thanks to \$43 million (\$15,600 per student) from state school aid, a 6.37 percent increase over last year's aid, a hike partly due to the district's 3.5 percent enrollment increase. The district gets almost \$3,000 per student in federal money, as well.

Does Wyandanch need more money? Maybe. Only 13 percent of students in third through eighth grades are proficient in English and math, and the high school graduation rate is about 65 percent. Teaching disadvantaged students takes a lot of resources, particularly if English is not their first language. And the district faces an unexpected \$3.3 million budget deficit that a recent audit said stems from overspending and overestimating rev-

enues. But those are issues of management more than funding.

Would doubling per-pupil spending help? Probably, somewhat, but that does not change the fact that the residents of Wyandanch don't have the money to give.

Nor does it change the fact that, as NYSUT so often points out, many of these kids' challenges, of poverty and hunger and poor housing and neglect, happen outside school and can't be blamed on educators.

If that's the case, then maybe NYSUT ought to push for more funding to address hunger and homelessness and joblessness and health care and all of the things that plague poor children outside of school instead of seeking to drive every possible resource to schools.

But the union should not push to make passage of huge property tax hikes in such communities easier, driving up housing costs for both owners and renters. That only worsens the societal and educational problems that poverty causes. That cannot be the goal of our educators.

Lane Filler is a member of Newsday's editorial board.

political machinations of Pelosi and Schumer.

Milton Brody,
Roslyn Heights

To say "The president won nothing" is so wrong! He achieved another great victory on his sole quest to create havoc, stir up hate, confusion, fear, distrust and to undermine our precious, fragile, democratic way of life.

When will our constitutional checks and balances say enough and save our beloved country?

John Wolf,
Levittown

We the people are so sick of the politicians and government shutdowns. Both sides of the aisle are at fault. Here are three things the people should push for:

- Stop paying members of the House of Representatives and Senate during a shutdown, but continue government worker pay. The politicians have no in-



Democratic congressional leaders Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer take questions on Friday about the end of the federal shutdown.

AP / ANDREW HARNIK

centive to stop shutdowns because there is no risk for them.

- Enact term limits for members of the House and Senate. They should serve and leave.

- Bar politicians from lobbying for five years after they leave office. This will help limit their influence on the system.

Call your senators or represen-

tative and demand their help.

Stephen Cella,
Oakdale

■ Come November 2020, Donald Trump and his enablers would like to think that we will forget all about the government shutdown that he was "proud" to own. Don't forget. Do you think

Trump had any sympathy for government workers without paychecks? He's built a career without fully paying his contractors and vendors. Don't forget his shutdown when 2020 comes.

Mark Brady,
Dix Hills

■ Hats off to Sens. Rob Portman (R-Ohio) and Mark Warner (D-Va.) for sponsoring a bill that would end the practice of shutting down the government as a bargaining tool in passing a federal budget ["Schumer to Trump: Speed up back pay," News, Jan. 28].

Under this bill, if the president does not sign a new budget on time, last year's budget would automatically roll over into the new year and the government would continue to function. It's about time that we stop using our federal workers as pawns and hostages to dysfunctional government.

Tom DiPasquale,
Smithtown

■ The last immigrant caravan from Central America was stopped not by technology, but by a wall at the Mexico border and the U.S. Border Patrol. That wall, which Speaker Nancy Pelosi calls immoral, sits in California, her home state.

Technology has its place in telling you that someone already has crossed the border, but it's not going to stop them. The answer is a wall, or a barrier supported by technology and more Border Patrol agents.

Fix the immigration law. People who cross the border illegally should not be able to apply for asylum. They should walk up to a border checkpoint and make their request there.

Robert Bittner,
Cutchogue

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