

Budget calls for job cuts

Hempstead Schools proposal seeks to trim 100 posts, avoids tax levy hike

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The Hempstead School District's proposed \$221.5 million budget for the 2019-20 school year avoids an increase in the tax levy but calls for the elimination of 100 teaching and support staff positions, administrators said Tuesday night.

"I feel like the budget is a responsible budget," said Acting Superintendent Regina Armstrong, after the 6:30 p.m. budget presentation at Hempstead High School.

Armstrong said she is confident voters will approve the budget because it includes no hike of the tax levy.

"It wouldn't benefit the community to try to increase taxes," Armstrong said. "The community is already overburdened."

The meeting was the first of two where district officials plan to present the financial plan to the public and board members, three of whom, President LaMont Johnson, Vice President Carmen Ayala and Trustee David B. Gates, were present. If passed, the \$221,507,736 budget will represent an increase of 3 percent over the 2018-2019 budget of \$215,075,440.

Voters will cast ballots for the budget and school board candidates May 21.

Armstrong said the budget includes about \$10.3 million in trims, with some \$7.3 million of that coming from staff cuts. The remaining reductions include less spending on BOCES and attorney fees. Those cuts, she said, are necessary to absorb an increase in payments to charter schools, which have seen a rise in enrollment in recent years.

"We have to cut staff in order to make up for the charter schools," she said.

The cuts would include 36 teachers, 27 teaching assistants and 28 support staffers, all represented by three unions, and up to nine more employees in administrative positions, according to a draft of the plan distributed Tuesday.

In the days before the budget meeting, Armstrong alerted the public of tight times ahead, posting a notice on the district's website that state aid would be less than hoped for in the 2019-20 school year — and comes at an unfortunate time.

"Just as the District has started to make positive academic gains in all schools, we are getting squeezed hard on both the revenue side and the expenditure side of the budget," Armstrong wrote in an April 10 letter announcing state aid would increase by 1.67 percent, or \$1.88 million. The average increase in state aid Islandwide was 2.9 percent for the 2019-20 school year.

The slight increase will do little to offset major new expenditures, she said, such as the rapid rise in expenses related to the growing number of Hempstead children attending area charter schools. That cost is increasing from \$26 million in the 2017-18 school year to \$45 million in 2019-20, she said.

Officials said attendance at the three local charter schools — Academy Charter, Evergreen Charter and Roosevelt Children's Academy — would likely rise by 22 percent from 1,769 stu-



Acting schools Superintendent Regina Armstrong speaks at the school board 2019-20 budget presentation.

dents in the current school year to 2,155 in 2019-20.

"I, therefore have no alternative but to propose cuts in spending for the upcoming school year, in order to present a balanced budget for the 2019-2020 school year," she said in the letter, calling the cuts "substantial" but executed in a way that will "protect the educational services for students."

Jack Bierwirth, a state-appointed special adviser to the district, said at a recent board meeting that the spike "throws everything back to square one," referring to the budget calculations.

But in the same letter, and at the meeting Tuesday night, Armstrong cited a string of academic, curricular and capital improvements.

They include the removal of three elementary schools from the State Education Department's list of low-performing schools. Those include the Jackson Main, David Paterson and Front Street schools, which also were separately recognized for accelerated improvement in student achievement, she said.

Armstrong said the district is a candidate for International Baccalaureate Primary and Middle Years Programs; is offering more Advanced Placement, Career and Technical Education and STEAM programs; is implementing Small Learning Academies at the Alverta B. Gray Schultz Middle School; and is expanding Dual Language and Arts programs.

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