Newsday
"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

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EDITORIAL

School spending defies the cap

2% limit on tax hikes has helped, but budget growth still outpaces inflation

When Long Islanders vote on school budgets Tuesday, they will be presented with the latest in a string of annual spending plans that are not escalating as quickly as they once did but are still growing at a distressing pace. School taxes are a primary reason why this region is becoming unaffordable.

To stem that, in 2010, New York State imposed a property tax cap of 2 percent a year, or the rate of inflation, whichever is lower, to curb increases that averaged 6 percent annually in the preceding decade.

But mostly because of generous annual increases in state aid that have averaged about 4 percent a year and the exemption of certain expenses from the tax cap, school spending in Nassau and Suffolk counties has risen at nearly double the rate of inflation, despite the cap. Spending on the Island's schools is up 18 percent since 2012-13, while inflation was just 10 percent. That's your money, whether it's funded by state income taxes coming through the back door or property taxes upfront.

School budgeting is complicated, and there is no simple way to conclude that these faster-than-inflation increases mean schools are overspending. However, the largest factors affecting budgets suggest spending should shrink or grow more slowly than inflation, not outpace it, particularly in Suffolk County.

NEWSDAY / AUDREY C. TIERNAN

The most obvious explanation for spending increasing faster than inflation would be higher enrollment, but the region has seen lower public school enrollment. Nassau saw a 1.5 percent total population increase from 2012 to 2017, but school population fell about half a percentage point, from 201,579 K-12 students to 200,886. In Suffolk, the overall population fell by four-tenths of a percent from 2012 to 2017, and school enrollment declined by more than 5 percent, from 247,139 students to 234,524.

But in both counties, school spending would increase about 18 percent from the 2012-13 school year through the 2019-20 budgets that will be voted on Tuesday.

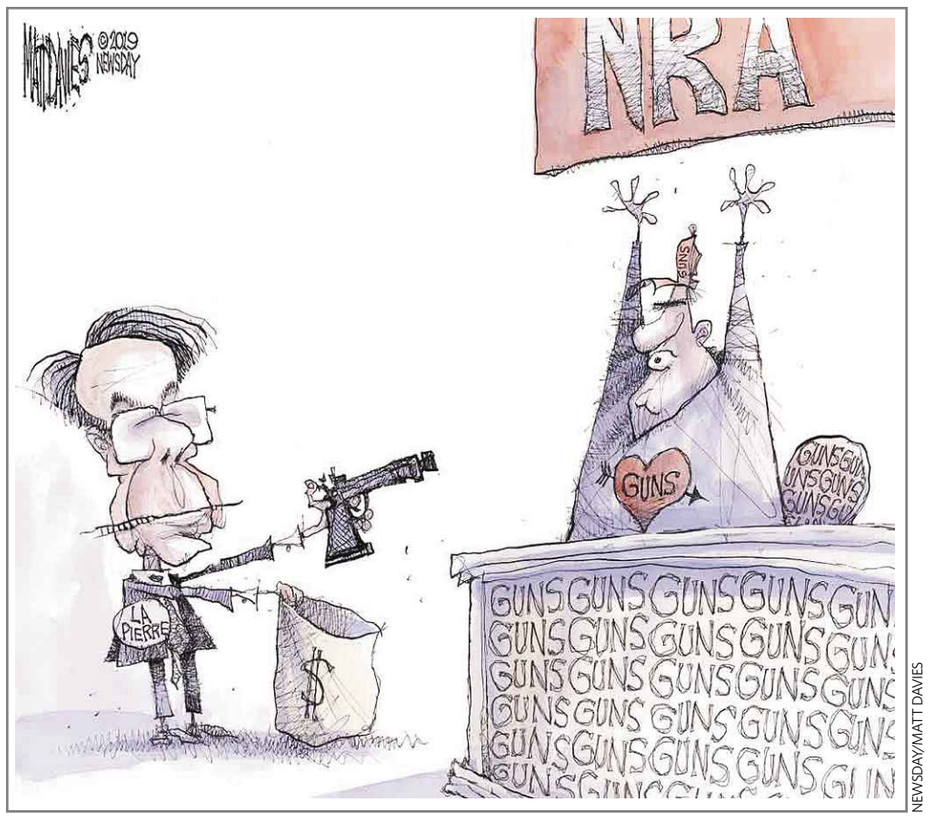
Pension costs, a factor that school officials and teachers unions frequently cite to argue that more funding is needed, have plummeted. After the stock market crashed in 2008, pension contribution costs doubled. At the height, in the 2014-15 school year, districts had to contribute an amount equal to 17.53 percent of their payroll for pensions. But the markets recovered and the payments dropped. For the 2019-20 school year, the contribution has declined to 8.86 percent of payroll, a huge savings for districts. So where does the money go?

To educators, mostly. When the tax cap passed, and as the economy suffered, many districts touted "no raise" contracts that were never really "no raise," thanks to automatic annual step raises for increased seniority. Now, though, more contracts include annual raises in addition to step increases, and total hikes of 4 or 5 percent are not unheard of.

As technology progresses, school enrollments decrease, pension costs plummet and state aid grows, Long Islanders ought to get a break on property taxes. Yet the vast majority of budgets include property tax increases, and unless the results of Tuesday's vote is a surprise, nearly all will be approved by residents, who continue to cherish their local schools but increasingly cannot afford them.

— The editorial board

MATT DAVIES



NEWSDAY/MATT DAVIES

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LETTERS

OT controversy at the MTA and LIRR

Another agency has joined the investigations into possible overtime abuse at the Long Island Rail Road ["Queens DA office joins LIRR OT probe," News, May 15].

Where were all these agencies (and the governor) when riders received fare hike after fare hike over all these years? Did anyone question where this money was going and audit the books? And how about the employees responsible for processing payroll? Did anyone bring to management's attention the enormous overtime dollars being paid?

The top earners (and others) should not be allowed to pad their pensions by outrageous amounts. Employees of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority should not ride the gravy train on the backs of commuters.

Liz Falcone,
Glen Head

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I am sick and tired of all the Long Island Rail Road bashing in the press. I think it all started right after fare hikes at Easter. The public seems to think that the employees get raises every time the fares go up. Untrue!

Also, when did it become a crime to get paid for working overtime? The LIRR has taken on a lot of projects that are on deadlines. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo is pushing to get them finished on time, so if there are problems and setbacks, overtime is needed. Workers who stay to work overtime are on the job for many hours away from their homes and families. They earn that overtime money! They shouldn't be harassed about it.

The public complains when the LIRR is in disrepair, and the system is outdated, causing delays. But then people have a fit when service is disrupted while work is done to update facilities, tracks and systems.

I retired from the LIRR last year and was blessed to have worked for the railroad for 30 years in jobs ranging from station cleaner to carpenter. A lot of good people there work hard every day and do their jobs very well.

Kevin Mackey,
West Islip

Free community college makes sense

Columnist William F.B. O'Reilly mischaracterizes the issue of deficit spending ["Our reckless spending spree," Opinion, May 3].

Sen. Elizabeth Warren and other Democratic candidates for president have advocated for free college to help those who aspire to improve their