

Senate push: Make tax cap permanent

BY YANCEY ROY
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ALBANY — Long Island senators, who now make up a key bloc of the Democratic majority, said Thursday the chamber will approve a bill next week to make the state's property tax cap permanent.

Doing so would complete a high priority for some Island officials and would end the need to renew the cap every few years. But it also sets up the first potential conflict between the Senate and Assembly, whose members have been less convinced about giving the cap permanent status.

Sen. James Gaughran (D-Northport), sponsor of the tax cap bill, called the measure "vital" and said the Senate plans to vote on it Wednesday.

"When I ran, I pledged to do what whatever I can to reduce the tax burden Long Islanders face," said the freshman senator. "This is an important first step."

Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins said Democrats, who just took over the Senate after years of Republican control, wanted to make the tax cap a priority.

"We need to ensure that New York homeowners are not taxed out of their communities," Stewart-Cousins (D-Yonkers) said in an email. "After years of uncertainty regarding the future of the property tax cap, the Senate Majority is stepping up and clearly demonstrating our commitment to keeping taxes under control."

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo successfully shepherded the tax cap through the legislature in 2011, his first year in office. It requires a 60 percent "supermajority" vote for any school district or local government board to raise annual property taxes more than 2 percent or the rate of inflation, whichever is lower. The law does contain some exceptions for local economic growth that don't count against the cap. Since its implementation, 2 percent overrides have been rare.



Sen. James Gaughran

Rather than make it permanent, lawmakers have always renewed it a few years at a time. It is set to expire in 2020, but typically has been linked, for practical political purposes, with rent-control laws, which expire this year.

The cap is politically popular and it has never been in real danger of expiring. That said, it's not certain all lawmakers will want to make it permanent.

Cuomo supports the idea. Republicans, when they controlled the Senate, also supported it.

But the Assembly's Democratic majority hasn't backed a permanent cap, in part because the idea has long been opposed by teachers' unions, which are major campaign supporters, as well as local municipal and school district leaders, who are important constituencies. They all blame the cap for layoffs and reduced programs.

The influential New York State United Teachers has called the cap arbitrary, undemocratic and unsustainable.

A key political question will be whether now, with their fellow Democrats controlling the Senate, the Assembly would be more amenable to making a deal.

"This is a matter we have not yet conferenced and I cannot give a projection to see what the general feeling will be," Assemblyman Charles Lavine (D-Glen Cove) told Newsday recently.

Some Democratic Assembly members said they could accept a permanent tax cap if it were nuanced, allowing more spending to be excluded from the cap.

With Michael Gormley

Schools in

State ranks 34 on Long Island as poor performers

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND
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Fifteen school districts and 34 individual schools on Long Island were rated Thursday by the state as needing academic improvement under a new system — required by federal education law — that for the first time takes into account the number of students who boycott state tests.

Statewide, the low-performance list includes 106 districts and 370 schools, the state Education Department announced.

On the Island, the new list ranged from Freeport, Roosevelt and Farmingdale in Nassau County to Brentwood, Middle Country and Greenport in Suffolk County, among others. Designated districts included some that have generally maintained good academic standing in the past, as well as those that have consistently struggled.

State education officials said their prime objective over the next two years will be to help districts and schools improve performance. Officials added that they would distribute up to \$80 million in federal assistance to help localities plan for upgrades.

Districts were advised in advance of the state's ratings and given a chance to appeal.

"Our accountability system is not designed to name and blame schools," Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia said during a teleconference Thursday with reporters. "We know how hard educators in these schools are working."

Locally, some school administrators voiced frustration with the designations, especially in cases where numerical counts related to test boycotts may have played a role. Administrators said they had little or no control over parents' decisions to pull their children out of the standardized tests; the volume of opt-outs in recent years has affected participation in English

School Accountability Status

Here are Long Island schools, by district, that the state Education Department has rated as needing improvement under its new accountability system. Schools are designated as needing Comprehensive Support and Improvement, or CSI, or Targeted Support and Improvement, or TSI. Each of the districts is a Targeted District because it has one or more CSI schools or overall student enrollments classified as CSI or TSI.

District/School	2018-19 Accountability Status
<i>Nassau</i>	
Farmingdale	
Northside Elementary School	CSI
Freeport	
Caroline G. Atkinson School	CSI
Hempstead	
Alverta B. Gray Schultz Middle School	CSI
Franklin Elementary School (now Joseph A. McNeil)	TSI
Hempstead High School	CSI
Jackson Annex School	TSI
Roosevelt	
Roosevelt Middle School	CSI
<i>Suffolk</i>	
Amityville	
Edmund W. Miles Middle School	CSI
Park Avenue School	CSI
Brentwood	
East Middle School	CSI
North Middle School	CSI
South Middle School	CSI
Southwest Elementary School	CSI

and math exams given to students in grades three through eight.

"I think it's an unfair designation, because if more of our kids were taking the test, it would not be a concern," said Roberta Gerold, superintendent of Middle Country schools, one of the systems designated as a "Target District."

Thursday's announcement marked the latest in a decades-long effort by federal and state authorities to identify schools with the lowest academic achievement and to require accountability. A series of federal laws has required identification of at least the bottom 5 percent of schools in each state.

"Needless to say, the opt-out movement on the Island is a contributing factor to these unfair designations," said Kishore Kuncham, the schools chief in Freeport, which is another system newly identified as a Target District.

Kuncham said he was especially disheartened that school classifications appeared to be "decided almost entirely by results on state tests." State officials insisted the new rating system draws on a far wider range of criteria than that used before.

While at least 11 districts on the Island lost their ratings of academic "Good Standing," Westbury saw that status restored. "We are extremely excited, and we're looking forward to having even higher-achieving schools," Superintendent Eudes Budhai said.

Performance has improved at the district's middle school, where students are encouraged to take high-school-level Regents exams in math, science and history, Budhai added.

Over the years, New York State has applied numerous and shifting designations to low-performing campuses: "Schools Under Registration Review," "Priority Schools,"

need of support

District/School	2018-19 Accountability Status
Central Islip	
Cordello Avenue Elementary School	TSI
Ralph Reed School	CSI
Greenport	
Greenport Elementary School	CSI
Greenport High School	CSI
Longwood	
Longwood Middle School	CSI
Middle Country	
Jericho Elementary School	CSI
Stagecoach School	CSI
Patchogue-Medford	
Bay Elementary School	CSI
Canaan Elementary School	CSI
Eagle Elementary School	CSI
Medford Elementary School	CSI
Tremont Elementary School	CSI
Riverhead	
Pulaski Street Elementary School	TSI
Riverhead Middle School	CSI
Roanoke Avenue School	CSI
Sachem	
Cayuga School	CSI
Waverly Avenue School	CSI
South Country	
Bellport Middle School	CSI
Brookhaven Elementary School	CSI
Wyandanch	
Milton L. Olive Middle School	TSI
Wyandanch Memorial High School	TSI

“Focus Schools,” “Persistently Struggling Schools,” and “Struggling Schools.”

Albany this time has borrowed federal nomenclature and created two new categories: Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools, or CSI, required to make the most sweeping improvements, and Targeted Support and Improvement schools, or TSI, where narrower improvements are required.

State officials predicted a big increase next year in the number of schools classified as TSI, because the rules require two years of low performance before that rating applies.

Classifications are spelled out in the Every Student Succeeds Act, which was passed by Congress in 2015, replacing the No Child Left Behind Act from 2001. New York’s plan for carrying out the law was approved by Washington a year ago.

New York education officials like to point out that their cur-

Compiled by Michael R. Ebert
SOURCE: NYS Education Department

DATABASE
State ratings
school-by-school
newsday.com/data

rent plan broadens the criteria under which schools will be ranked academically and then categorized. Under the old system, schools were judged mainly by their students’ scores on state English Language Arts and math tests and, at the high school level, by graduation rates. Any high school with a rate below 67 percent is considered failing.

The new ratings factor in new criteria. Those indicators include chronic student absenteeism, English proficiency, success in advanced courses and readiness for college, careers and civic participation.

The New State Ratings

The state Education Department, following federal law, established new categories designating schools and districts that require academic improvement.

■ **Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools (CSI):** These schools rank in the bottom 5 percent statewide, based on student test scores and other criteria, and will be identified at least every three years. High schools are placed in this category if they have graduation rates of less than 67 percent.

■ **Targeted Support and Improvement schools (TSI):** These schools deal with more limited problems — namely, low achievement among certain subgroups of students, such as those who are disabled or economically disadvantaged. Schools in this category are named annually.

■ **Target Districts (TD):** These districts have either one or more CSI schools or overall student enrollments that would be regarded as CSI or TSI. Districts are named annually.

One addition has generated particular controversy. It’s a complex formula that calculates lower academic weightings for schools where large numbers of parents opt their children out of state tests. In effect, the formula complies with a federal requirement that at least 95 percent of students participate in state English and math tests each year.

The change has especially raised objections on Long Island, which has the highest opt-out rates in the state.

State Education Department officials have tried to offer reassurances that no school where test scores are above the state average will get an unfavorable rating because of high opt-out rates alone. However, that leaves uncertainty for the other half of schools in the state that rank even slightly below average.

Test boycotts are not a phenomenon on the Island alone. A recent Newsday review found that 85 percent of districts statewide — 612 of 718 — fell short of the federal requirement of 95 percent test participation.

In Hempstead, mixed results

BY KESHIA CLUKEY
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New accountability ratings released by the state Thursday underscore the need for the Hempstead district to strengthen efforts to boost student achievement, its leaders said.

The nearly 8,000-student district as a whole was listed as a “Target District,” but there was good news: Three elementary schools formerly on the Education Department’s list of low performers — David Paterson, Jackson Main and Front Street — were in “Good Standing” in the new designations. In addition, Barack Obama Elementary held onto its Good Standing status.

“We’re very excited about the progress we’re making,” said Regina Armstrong, the district’s acting superintendent. “The next step is to make sure we’re addressing all of our subgroups [of students] so that those schools that are still in accountability status will come out.”

Under the new designations, Hempstead High School and Alverta B. Gray Schultz Middle School were named as schools needing “Comprehensive Support and Improvement,” or CSI, the most serious classification. Franklin Elementary, which this year was renamed Joseph A. McNeil Elementary, and the Jackson Annex School were listed schools needing “Targeted Support and Improvement,” or TSI.

The high school and middle school already have been required to submit expansive improvement plans to the Education Department. They are two of 43 schools statewide in the new ratings, including Wyandanch’s Milton L. Olive Middle School, that were placed under receivership by terms of a 2015 law aimed at turning around chronically struggling schools. The department in December said all three Long Island schools had made “demonstrable improvement” in their aca-



BARRY SLOAN

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— Jack Bierwirth, Distinguished Educator to the Hempstead Union Free School District

dem performance in the 2017-18 academic year.

The new ratings support recent reports filed with the Education Department by Jack Bierwirth, a special adviser to the district, who has said it is making progress.

“I see a real seriousness in the district to getting itself off every list and staying off lists permanently,” said Bierwirth, who was appointed by Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia as “distinguished educator” to help the district. “Whatever that gets labeled, is just a notation,” he said. “The real thing is they’ve got to make that progress.”

Along with state test scores and graduation rates, the district also must focus to improve the success of certain subgroups of students, specifically black and Latino students, students with disabilities, and those economically disadvantaged, Armstrong said.

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