

## EDITORIAL

# The vexing riddle of school funding

Overall state aid keeps rising as many enrollments fall. Why do taxes still go up?

For eight years, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has made holding the line on state spending a calling card. Across-the-board budget increases, he says, have been under 2 percent each year, and that includes the \$168 billion plan just finalized for 2018-19.

Yet state aid to schools has skyrocketed, even as many other state agencies and initiatives have dealt with flat or shrinking funding.

On Long Island, state aid to schools will reach \$3.2 billion next year, a 55 percent increase since the 2011-12 school year. That's smart politics, because for many taxpayers, schools are the top priority, and the property-tax cap Cuomo pushed through in 2011 would have faced continuous opposition had he not cushioned the blow with additional aid. It might also be smart governance, because nothing is more important to a state than the quality of its children's educations.

But many school districts — as they raise their taxes as much or nearly as much as the cap allows to supplement Albany's growing aid — haven't tightened their belts at all. Some are increasing spending significantly even as enrollments drop rapidly. And that can't be allowed to go on, particularly as many Long Islanders face the equivalent of a huge tax increase thanks to a \$10,000 limit on federal deductions for state and local property taxes.

If the state takes over more of the burden of funding schools, shouldn't we get breaks on local taxes? With the average Long Island school district getting a 3.57 percent increase in state aid, why are local district taxes predicted to increase by 2.6 percent, too?

The biggest wins and losses in state school funding are mostly caused by big enrollment increases or declines. And the budgets of districts serving fewer students speak loudest about why taxpayers never see taxes go down. The schools flunk at cutting spending.

State aid for the Smithtown district, which has seen enrollment declines for at least eight years, will drop by 1.56 percent next year. In the 2010-11 school year, Smithtown served 10,810 students with a budget of \$211 million. This year there are 8,929 students in the district, a decline of 17 percent. But the budget for 2017-18 is \$239 million. In seven years, Smithtown has gone from spending \$19,518 per student to \$26,766.

That's an increase of 37 percent over a period when total inflation was 13 percent. And it's the norm. Massapequa, with a 1.95 percent reduction in state aid next year, went from spending \$22,032 per student in 2010-11 to \$28,242 in 2017-18, an increase of 28 percent. The budget is up \$18 million in seven years, and enrollment is down 1,105 students.

It's not hard to see why. The Smithtown school board promises to reduce elementary classroom sizes this fall for the second year in a row. That's fantastic, if local taxpayers want to support it, though it's troubling that it's increasingly taxpayers statewide, who get no vote on the budget, footing the bill.

In Massapequa, the school district overestimated expenses by nearly \$25 million over three years. That keeps taxes high.

School budget votes are in May. Now is a good time to ask superintendents to show their math. Explain why taxes don't fall even when state funding goes up, and there are fewer kids to teach. — *The editorial board*



GORDON M. GRANT

## MATT DAVIES



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## LETTERS

### President should pay for weekend travel

I have just completed my 2017 tax return and am prepared to write a significant check to the U.S. Treasury, as I do each year. As I write this check, I will deduct \$25.

My reason is that I don't believe the Constitution considered it reasonable for a taxpayer to pay all the expenses involved with a president who feels the need to fly to Florida several times a month to play golf and promote his private properties.

The weekend of March 24, in particular, the president could have met with students outside the White House to discuss gun slaughter in schools. Instead, he decided to once again go to Florida ["Students march 'for our lives' on D.C.," News, March 25].

I'm estimating \$25 as my

share of the president's travel costs, and hence the deduction.

Frank Antioco,  
Stewart Manor

### Teens, guns and the Second Amendment

On March 31, 1968, President Lyndon Johnson shocked the nation by announcing, "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president."

One of the main reasons was that students were beginning to rally around Robert F. Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy, given those candidates' anti-war views and the growing anti-war movement.

Is history repeating itself? We saw massive marches and rallies around the country concerning gun control following the shooting at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas

High School in Florida ["Students march 'for our lives' on D.C.," News, March 25].

Where was President Donald Trump during these rallies? At his "winter White House," Mar-a-Lago.

Trump's base is pro-Second Amendment. Will the students of today repeat what their parents and grandparents did, and manage to unseat a president even before many of them are of age to vote?

Jared Goerke,  
Plainview

Newsday did an excellent job in covering March for Our Lives events, but I would characterize the counterprotesters as assault-weapons advocates ["LI students protest gun violence," News, March 25].

I was across the street with the group demanding more sensible gun-control laws. The couple of dozen