

## EDITORIAL



Wyandanch residents and school staff members picket outside a board of education meeting on Wednesday.

HOWARD SIMMONS

# A district failing its mission

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

**T**he Wyandanch school district is the poorest in Suffolk County, with income and property wealth that are one-third the state average.

But next month that community will be asked to approve a budget that would raise school taxes on the average home by 42 percent, from \$6,700 a year to \$9,400. This is the work of an incompetent and patronage-driven school board and should be rejected by district voters with a resounding no.

For years, state officials have sounded alarms about both the financial instability of the Wyandanch district, and its dismal academic performance. The challenges the district faces are significant: 28 percent of the students are English language learners, 19 percent have disabilities and 87 percent are economically disadvantaged. Unaccompanied minors from Central America present more difficulties.

Educating such children well is expensive and arduous. But thanks to state and federal aid, Wyandanch's spending for 2018-19 on its approximately 2,700 students is almost \$27,000 per pupil — just below the county average. Other districts facing similar challenges, like Brentwood and Central Islip, are not fiscally dysfunctional. While education experts and elected officials agree that more money, properly used, could improve instruction, giving additional

## Wyandanch voters should express frustration with mismanagement by rejecting a 42% school tax hike

funds to an irresponsible board would be a waste.

In economically disadvantaged communities, school districts are often top providers of good jobs and rich contracts, and the school board becomes a key political power. Nowhere is this more true than in Wyandanch, where dueling factions knock each other out of office by promising to end nepotism, only to reward family members and supporters with jobs and contracts once they win. Rules that demand merit-based employment decisions and competitive bid processes are ignored. Financial controls are lacking. Unqualified administrators cash large paychecks and board members have traveled to conventions in style, while the high school does not offer a single Advanced Placement course. And the many dedicated educators in the district are dispirited by a lack of support.

**F**or the past 12 months, increasingly serious warnings have been issued over the district's finances. Two state comptroller audits and one independent assessment sought by the district concluded that the district has drastically underestimated expenses and overestimated revenues. The district has blown through its rainy-day fund and is on the edge of insolvency.

And the administration and board are so confused that as recently as 10 weeks ago, district officials promised they would not exceed the state's 2 percent cap on property tax increases, before announcing the planned 42 percent increase last week.

**I**t would be one thing if the Wyandanch School District's problems were merely financial, but the district fails to serve its students academically, too. Last year, only 13 percent of Wyandanch's students in grades three through eight tested as proficient or better on the state's standardized tests. Wyandanch's high school is the lowest-ranked on Long Island as measured by the percentage of students who earn advanced diplomas, a marker considered a strong measure of adequate preparation for college. Just 5.6 percent of Wyandanch graduates received advanced diplomas in 2017. The average Islandwide is 56.4 percent. It ranked 112th of 114 Long Island high schools in overall graduation rate.

The situation is such a disaster that the temptation to demand the district be dissolved is strong. Wyandanch is surrounded by the financially stable and more successful districts of Half Hollow Hills, North Babylon, West Babylon, Deer Park and Farmingdale. But opposition to divvying up Wyandanch's students and neighborhoods

into those districts would be fierce.

It's also tempting to demand that the state take over the Wyandanch district, but the state has practically no expertise in overseeing the day-to-day operations of a school district. The one time such a takeover was tried, in Roosevelt, the results were mixed at best.

Exceeding the state property tax cap requires approval by 60 percent of the voters, so it's likely this \$78 million budget will fail in May. An overwhelming rejection is necessary to send notice to the school board. Earlier this month, voters rejected the 39 percent budget increase requested by the Wyandanch public library, plagued with many of the same management problems.

But assuming the district does not pass a huge tax increase this year, the resulting cuts must be made in ways that sustain crucial programs. The Wyandanch schools need the help of a monitor provided by the state to advise on finances, and a distinguished educator provided by the state to guide the district on instruction, a move that's begun to help in Hempstead.

**T**he Wyandanch community cannot prosper if the schools continue to falter. The students of Wyandanch cannot thrive while incompetent management and political self-dealing fester. And the board cannot be entrusted with more money while it flounders.