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January 24, 2008

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Budget would reduce aid to a third of LI schools

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January 23, 2008

More than a third of Long Island's school districts would suffer cuts in state operating aid next year under a budget plan unveiled yesterday by Gov. Eliot Spitzer, who is trying to tighten spending in the face of a weakening economy.

In all, 44 local school systems would see their aid reduced, compared with only 10 for which cuts were proposed by the governor last year. More than half of all districts - 67 out of 124 - would either get cuts or increases of less than 3 percent, which wouldn't allow them to keep up with the cost of living, compared with 42 that faced such prospects last year.

School officials expect state lawmakers to come up with substantially more money than Spitzer recommends, especially with elections coming up in November. Nonetheless, even talk of financial retrenchment has many educators feeling jittery and warning that aid cuts will inevitably increase property taxes.

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the \$468,855 cut, or .63 percent, proposed for their system would inevitably force a hike in local property taxes.

"To receive a decrease is really dramatic," said Herb Chessler, the district's assistant superintendent for business, "but hopefully, the legislature will put this money back in."

Statewide, Spitzer's budget would increase school operating aid by \$1.2 billion, and overall assistance by \$1.4 billion. The latter figure includes money used for school construction and renovation. Overall aid would rise 7.1 percent next year, to a statewide total of \$21 billion.

Operating aid for Long Island would rise by \$86.5 million. Overall assistance would rise \$118.5 million, or about 4.9 percent.

Essentially, the governor's plan would continue a policy first announced last year of focusing assistance on districts with concentrations of students who are impoverished or non-English speaking.

The biggest chunk of new overall assistance - \$547.3 million, or an increase of 7.2 percent - would go to New York City. Among the Island's districts that would get substantial boosts in operating aid are Brentwood, with \$13.7 million or 7.45 percent, and Copiague, with \$3.3

"Holy smokes!" said Bill Johnson, superintendent of Rockville Centre schools, as details of the plan emerged yesterday. Johnson's district is slated for a 3.69 percent cut in aid, compared with a 6.69 percent increase proposed last year.

In Long Beach, schools chief Bob Greenberg said his system was "desperately" in need of money, both to provide remedial instruction and enriched courses. Spitzer would reduce Long Beach's aid by a little less than a percentage point, after proposing a 2.16 percent hike last year.

One surprise for local educational leaders is that the governor's recommended cuts aren't restricted to affluent school systems. To the contrary, the proposed cutbacks also would hit districts of modest means such as Middle Country, North Babylon and Patchogue-Medford.

Like colleagues in other districts, Middle Country administrators say

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million, or 8.85 percent.

Given the current economic turmoil, some school administrators express satisfaction with even modest aid raises. Such is the case in the Sachem system, the Island's second-largest, which would get an operating increase of about \$3.9 million, or 4.05 percent.

"If that holds up, then we're looking at no tax increase for the Sachem community," said Charles Murphy, the district's superintendent, who has gained widespread recognition in recent years for operating on lean budgets.

The budget plan

Overview:

\$1.46-billion increase for school aid

\$9.3-billion five-year plan for SUNY and CUNY infrastructure

\$19 million to expand Child Health Plus, health care for children

Tuition loan program for doctors who serve in underserved areas

Creates a commission to study

property taxes

Long Island highlights:

Total school aid: increase of \$118.8 million, to \$2.5 billion, 5 percent

Total STAR increase of \$38.9 million, to \$1.08 billion, 3.7 percent

Total Aid and Incentives for

Municipalities, increase of \$873,640, to \$28.5 million, 3.1 percent


Total of \$28.47 million for capital improvements at parks and historic sites

Source: N.Y. State Division of Budget

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