

CLARENCE CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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February 27, 2019

The Honorable Michael Ranzenhofer

New York State Senate

8203 Main Street Suite 4

Williamsville, NY 14221

Dear Senator Ranzenhofer,

Thank you for your continued support of the Clarence Central School District. My purpose in writing to you is to respectfully ask for your assistance in responding legislatively to the proposals for School Aid in Governor Cuomo's Executive Budget for 2019-20.

First and foremost, Governor Cuomo's recommended increase in School Aid is inadequate. This year, the Governor proposed only a \$748 million increase in traditional formula-based school aid, consisting of Foundation Aid and reimbursement for expense-based aids. These funding streams are the ones that school districts can depend on. \$338 million of that total is an increase in Foundation Aid – just 1.9 percent increase over the 2018-19 school year. In Clarence, the Foundation Aid increase is \$35,526, which translates to 0.25 percent, or approximately \$8 per student, the lowest possible percentage increase. The bottom line is that a much larger increase in School Aid is needed.

Second, the Governor proposes consolidating 11 aid categories, including BOCES and Transportation Aid, into a new "Services Aid." After the consolidation, growth of the new "Services Aid" category would no longer be tied to actual expenditures, but instead be capped annually, based on district enrollment and inflation. The potential impact is a \$29 million decrease in aid compared to current law formulas. With lower inflation, school districts would lose even more. Changing the formula for expense-based aids, especially when school districts have come to depend on the only stable formula that still exists in the budget, would potentially wipe out any gains made by a Foundation Aid increase. It would also be impossible for school districts to make up the difference because of limitations on revenue due to the property tax cap. The proposed consolidation of expense-based aids into a single "Services Aid" category is highly problematic and the most negatively impactful element of the Governor's Budget. It should be rejected outright.

Third, the Governor proposes to inject state control over how funds are allocated among schools. A clumsy mathematical formula would supersede educational judgment. Eventually, any district with two or more schools at any level (elementary, middle or high school) could be affected. If a district has a school deemed high need and underfunded relative to its other schools, it would be required to devote to leveling up expenditures a sum equal to at least 10 percent of its Foundation Aid increase times the number of identified schools up to a cap. The proposal would treat every disparity as an inequity without regard to the experience level of teachers, collective bargaining agreements, the size of buildings, the number of special education children and support personnel and other factors that impact per pupil spending calculations. Districts would be forced to reallocate funds in order to merely comply with the state's awkward directives.

Fourth, the Governor seeks to accelerate the shift in the STAR property tax relief program from exemptions which directly reduce school tax bills to a credit program which requires homeowners to pay their full tax bill, then wait for a credit check from the state. The proposal would cap growth in STAR benefits under the exemption program while allowing them to grow by up to 2 percent per year. It would also reduce the income eligibility cut-off for the basic exemption program from \$500,000 to \$250,000 while maintaining the higher threshold for the credit program. The effect of these proposals would be to pressure more current beneficiaries to move from exemptions to credits.

The Property Tax Cap is both popular politically and it serves as a check on school district spending. It has also rendered it impossible for school districts to put forward a budget that exceeds the cap as a means of gaining revenue. School districts are more dependent on the state than ever before to provide adequate funding in order to maintain programs. In Clarence, we had to make some program reductions over the past eight years to balance budgets and stay within the tax cap. The eleven-year average tax levy increase in Clarence has been 1.97 percent, far lower than the cost of living increases over the same period. Any further program cuts will marginalize a great school district and a tremendous community asset. We need your help to make things right.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our concerns. Please do not hesitate to contact me at 407-9102 if you need further input or information.

Sincerely,

Geoffrey M. Hicks, Ed.D.

Superintendent