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## 99 percent of school budgets approved

By Paul Heiser  
SENIOR RESEARCH ANALYST

Voters approved nearly 99 percent of school spending plans statewide.

Among 676 budgets put up for vote on May 19, 666 passed – an approval rate of 98.7 percent. That does not include the Hempstead school district in Nassau County, the status of whose budget was still unknown at press time.

Budget success was uniform across the state, with no region having less than a 94 percent approval rate, and five regions having budget passage rates of 100 percent.

In Dutchess County's Millbrook school district, 71 percent of voters gave thumbs up to a budget with a tax levy increase of 1.98 percent. "Millbrook, and especially the superintendent, do a great job with the money they are given," Millbrook resident Perry Hartswick told the *Poughkeepsie Journal*. "All of the money in this budget is necessary to better the education here."

NYSSBA Executive Director Timothy G. Kremer attributed the high



This Long Island mom was among voters in Garden City, where the budget passed 1,387 to 344.  
Photo courtesy of Garden City Public Schools

approval rate to "the combination of sound budgeting by school boards and a healthy state aid increase." That allowed many school districts to restore programs and positions without dramatic increases

in tax levies, he said.

Of the 658 budgets that had levy increases within their tax caps, 99.7 percent passed.

Districts needing 60 percent "su-

permajority" overrides because their tax levy increases exceeded their allowable limits were less successful than districts that proposed tax levies within their caps. Eighteen districts put up budgets with tax levy increases above their tax cap. Of those, 11 saw their budgets pass – a success rate of 61 percent.

One district that failed to get a supermajority was the Parishville-Hopkinton school district in the North Country. Slightly more than half of 168 residents who made it to the polls voted in favor of a proposed 4.9 percent increase in the tax levy. The district's tax cap was a negative number, so the district would have required 60 percent approval to keep its tax levy flat.

Superintendent Darin P. Saiff told the *Watertown Daily Times* that he understood that some people expect districts to stay under the cap, but the district has a duty to strive to meet students' educational needs. "I feel this year reflected a responsible approach to a pretty significant, unexpected increase in costs for students with special needs,"

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### Quoted

"We want to be able to publicize some of these best practices."

— Charles Szuberla, state Acting Deputy Commissioner for P-12 Education, on districts that use technology purchases to meet long-range educational plans (page 3)

## Regents fret over APPR issues as SED staff prepare regulations

By Cathy Woodruff  
SENIOR WRITER

Members of the Board of Regents wondered aloud at their May meeting about whether the governor and Legislature have left them any opportunity to improve New York's newest teacher evaluation system.

Over hours of discussion, several Regents urged a total overhaul or replacement of the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) system approved by the governor and Legislature as part of the 2015-16 budget.

A few members even suggested refusing to carry out the technical tasks assigned by lawmakers, citing insufficient time and authority to make meaningful improvements to the latest iteration of APPR. Regent Josephine Finn of Sullivan

County likened the assignment to being asked to turn on the oven after someone else already has chosen the recipe and mixed up the cake batter. "We're policy makers, and if you've done everything and left me this much room, you have tied my hands," she said.

Ultimately, however, the Regents gave staff a go-ahead signal to continue their technical work on the new APPR law, which is on track for a vote at the Regents' June 15-16 meetings. Legislation requires the Education Department and the Regents to carry out a number of technical tasks, such as setting weights and scoring ranges for teacher observations and student performance measures, by the end of June.

Catherine Collins, a new Regent from Western New York, asked whether the



Regent Finn:  
Tied hands?

board could seek to have the Legislature redesign the law, which includes a new table-style matrix that determines ratings for individual teachers.

"In terms of the matrix and specific language, it's in the statute," said SED Counsel Richard Trautwein. "We can't change that. ... We have consciously tried to make decisions that will improve (the system) within those limits, and we have listened to

the field, but there are limits to what we can do."

After the meeting, the Assembly passed a NYSSBA-supported bill that would give SED until November to adopt the new regulations, extend the deadline for districts to comply for another year,

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unhitch state aid increases from compliance with the law, and make the use of independent evaluators optional.

The bill, sponsored by Assembly Education Chairwoman Cathy Nolan (D-Queens), requires a review of the grades 3-8 English language arts and math tests and current learning standards and provide funding for the release of more test questions.

At the Regents meeting, Deputy Commissioner Kenneth Wagner summarized highlights of regulations being prepared. For instance, SED staff propose that districts unable to adopt new APPR plans by the Nov. 15 deadline be eligible for two-month hardship waivers. Extensions, in two-month increments, would require new approval by SED.

Also, SED staff also proposed creating a model plan for consideration, once regulations have been adopted. SED lacks authority to establish a “default” plan to be imposed on districts that cannot adopt their own, officials said.

NYSSBA Executive Director Tim Kremer said the staff recommendations “appear to closely represent the testimony presented at the Regents’ recent Learning Summit regarding teacher and principal evaluations. We now must wait for the Regents to approve regulations for a new performance appraisal system. NYSSBA’s hope is that the Regents look favorably on these recommendations.”

Other recommendations outlined by Wagner included details on how districts would be asked to perform teacher observations:

**Observation minimums.** Two 20-minute observations (one by the principal, one independent) for non-tenured teachers and tenured teachers not rated highly effective or effective overall in the prior year. Two 10-minute observations (one principal, one independent) for a tenured teacher rated highly effective or effective in prior year. At least one observation must be unannounced. In addition, short walkthrough observations of 5-10 minutes permitted. Observations may be in person or by video, either live or recorded.

**Observation weights.** Principal/supervisor observations weighted at 80 percent; independent observations weighted 20 percent. If an additional peer observation is included, the independent and peer observations would each be worth 10 percent.

**Observation scoring ranges.** Ranges for each of the four HEDI categories -- Highly effective (4 points), Effective (3 points), Developing (2 points) and Ineffective (1 points) -- would be calculated as a percentage of possible points, with a maximum of 4 points or 100 percent.

The dividing lines between ratings, known as “cut scores,” would be comparable to traditional passing grades for

students in high school or college: 65 percent (2.6 points) would earn a passing score of “developing,” 75 percent (3 points) or more would earn a score of “effective” and those with scores of 90 percent (3.6 points) or greater would be considered “highly effective.”

As with the observations, the student performance scoring ranges for student growth on state tests and student learning objectives also would be expressed in terms of commonly-recognized percentages. Again, the cut scores would be set at 65 percent for “developing,” 75 percent for “effective” and 90 percent for “highly effective.”

“There’s a common-sense notion that, if you achieve 65 percent of the points, you should be considered as passing, and should move from ‘ineffective’ to ‘developing,’” Wagner said as he discussed the recommended scoring ranges for observations.

Under terms of the state legislation, a teacher’s overall rating is determined by a 16-box matrix. Each possible combination of the two component ratings, observation and student performance, is established by the legislation.

Wagner noted that weight of observations, versus student performance, in any single teacher rating “literally depends on which box on the matrix you are talking

about.”

Regent Cathleen Cashin argued for lowering the recommended scoring ranges tied to student performance. Student performance is determined by a complex calculation of student growth, based on progress toward student learning objectives (SLOs) or improvement on state tests.

“If we’re going to make this work at the beginning, we have to make it as teacher-friendly as possible,” Cashin said. “That’s why I recommend lower ranges to start off with on student performance.”

However, Regent Roger Tilles of Long Island warned that making this system appear too palatable – “putting lipstick on a pig” was his analogy – could spoil chances for eventually crafting a better overall system.

“I think we know that we need to change the system, but we can’t do it now,” he said.

“I’m afraid of correcting this too much and adding more rouge to the lipstick,” Tilles said. “Let’s do what we have to now, and let’s start working on a plan that we can whole-heartedly endorse ... as soon as we do what we have to do legally.”



Tilles

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he said.

Last year 24 districts tried to override their tax caps and 65 percent of them passed on the first vote.

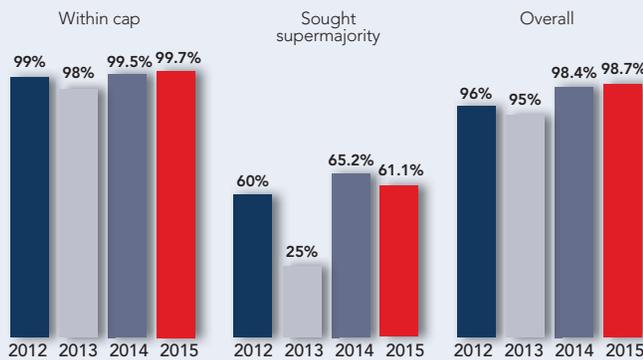
This nine districts whose budgets were defeated this year may put up the same budgets or revised ones for a re-vote on June 16. Alternatively, they may adopt contingency budgets that by law would carry no more than a zero percent tax levy increase.

Many bond propositions passed. In

the Williamsville school district in Erie County, residents approved \$50 million in construction projects including new turf for athletic fields. In South Glens Falls, voters also approved, 805 to 270, a proposition to purchase five school buses.

In school board races, opponents of state testing made a strong showing. Of 67 candidates endorsed by a Long Island opt-out group, 53 won election, according to *Newsday*.

Budget passage rates



Source: NYSSBA Research

On average, a budget requiring a simple majority is 1.5 times more likely to win approval than one requiring a 60 percent supermajority.

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