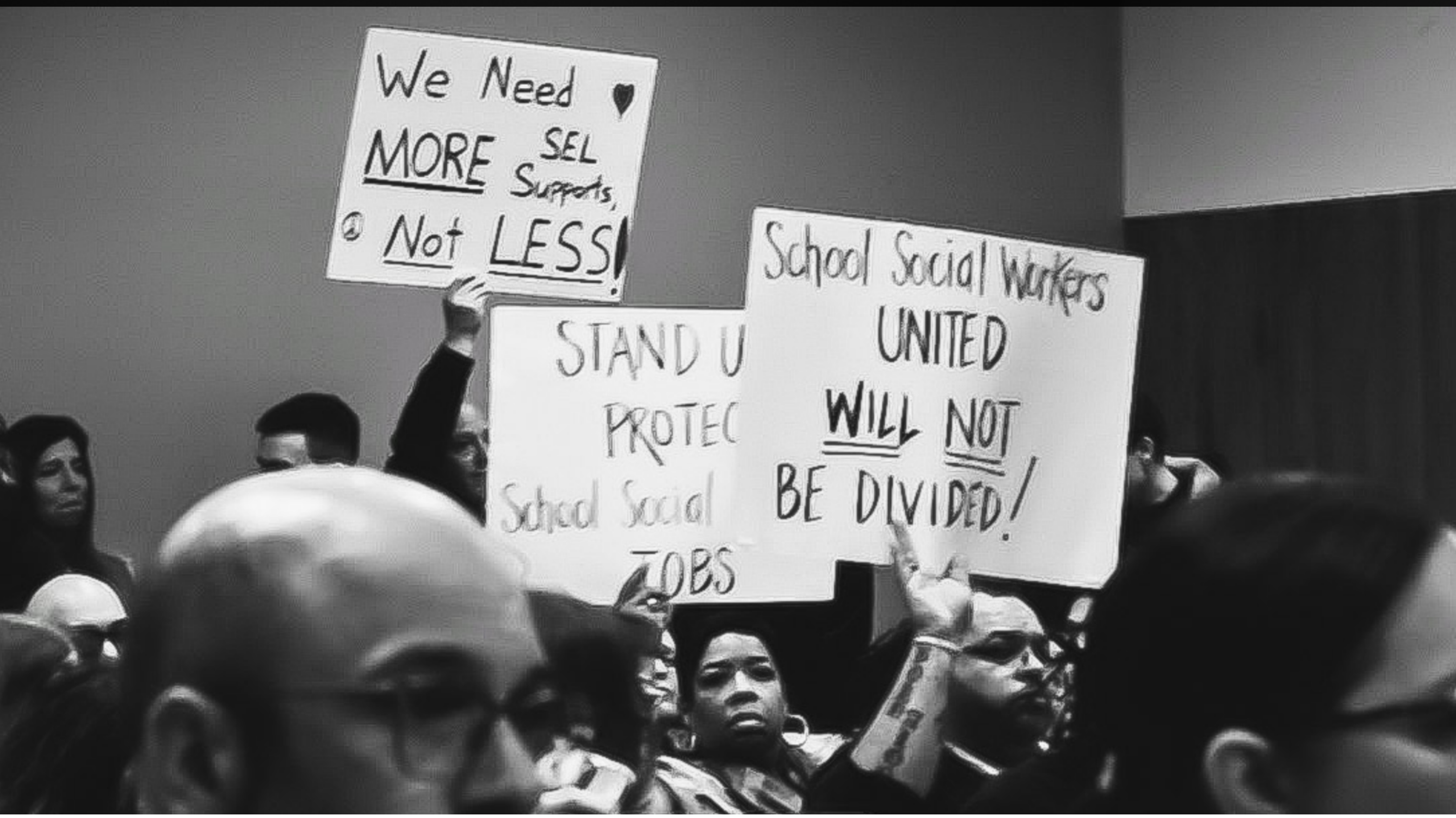
# WHAT STUDENTS AND FAMILIES LOSE WHEN SCHOOL DISTRICTS FACE BUDGET PRESSURE




## HOW LOCAL BUDGET PRESSURES SHAPE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY ACROSS NEW YORK

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*Cover image: Rochester rally in April 2026, Citizen Action of New York*

**The Alliance for Quality Education** is a coalition mobilizing communities across the state to keep New York true to its promise of ensuring a high-quality public school education to all students regardless of zip code. Combining its legislative and policy expertise with grassroots organizing, AQE advances proven-to-work strategies that lead to student success and echoes a powerful public demand for a high-quality public school education for all of New York's students.

**The Public Policy Education Fund** was founded in 1986 to address critical social, economic, racial and environmental issues facing low and moderate income New York State residents. Our areas of work have included health care, education, after-school programs, voter participation, economic development and consumer issues. PPEF uses many tools in its work, including grassroots organizing, research and policy development, public education on a wide range of policy issues, and community outreach.

# WHAT STUDENTS AND FAMILIES LOSE WHEN SCHOOL DISTRICTS FACE BUDGET PRESSURE

## HOW LOCAL BUDGET PRESSURES SHAPE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY ACROSS NEW YORK

### INTRODUCTION

By the time students return to school each fall, many of the decisions that will shape their year have already been made. How many adults are available in the building, whether after-school programs can continue, and how easily families can access early learning are all influenced by months of budget decisions.

As New York enters the 2026-27 school year, those local decisions are unfolding alongside important changes to state education funding. The enacted Fiscal Year 2027 State Budget continues investments in Foundation Aid and establishes a new funding structure for Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) intended to expand access across the state.[1] The budget also updates the Foundation Aid formula to better recognize students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, and English language learners.[2] Those changes build on years of advocacy and reflect an ongoing effort to better align school funding with student need.

The state budget, however, is only one part of the picture. School districts build their budgets while managing rising operating costs, enrollment changes, expiring federal funding, local revenue constraints, and district-specific financial challenges.[3] These pressures do not have the same cause or effect in every community, but they shape whether districts can protect staffing, transportation, programming, and the other supports students and families rely on throughout the school year.[4] They also unfold within broader choices about how New York raises and distributes public resources. How much the state asks from those with the greatest ability to contribute helps determine how much public investment is available when local resources fall short.

The consequences are often most visible after budgets have already been adopted. Students may return to schools with fewer counselors or teaching assistants. Families may find that transportation has changed, making it harder to participate in after-school activities. New investments in early learning may take time to reach families if districts need additional classroom space or staff before new seats can open. These experiences can look different from one community to the next, but together they raise a broader question about whether every district has the resources needed to provide students with not only their guaranteed constitutional right to a sound basic education, but also, with the broader opportunities they need to learn.[5]

This report examines what students and families lose when school districts face budget pressure. Drawing on official New York State budget documents, New York State Education Department guidance, district budget books, board presentations, and adopted local budgets, it considers how financial pressures are affecting schools across New York as the 2026-27 school year begins. The report also identifies policy choices that can help districts maintain stable staffing, expand access to early learning, and provide communities with the resources needed to support every student, while preventing local budget pressure from deepening existing racial and economic inequities. That means looking not only at how education funding is distributed, but also at whether the state is raising the revenue needed to sustain those investments over time.

| BUDGET DECISION | WHAT COULD CHANGE FOR STUDENTS |
|---|---|
| **Fewer counselors** | Less time with a counselor when a student needs academic or emotional support. Students who rely on school-based counseling may have fewer alternatives when that support is stretched thin, especially when outside counseling is difficult to access or afford. Research on lower student-to-counselor ratios has found associations with better attendance and fewer disciplinary incidents.[6] |
| **Fewer teaching assistants** | Less one-on-one or small-group help in the classroom. For students who rely on additional adult support, including many students with disabilities, that can mean less help accessing instruction and participating fully in the classroom. Research on paraprofessionals shows that they commonly provide these kinds of needed supports.[7] |
| **Transportation reductions** | Without late transportation, students who rely on district buses may have to choose between staying for extra help or after-school activities and having a reliable way home. Transportation is a documented barrier to after-school participation, particularly for families without another reliable way to get students home.[8] |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Fewer librarians** | Less access to a staffed library and to an adult who can help students find books and evaluate information. That loss can have a greater impact in communities where students have less access to comparable learning resources outside school. Research has repeatedly found an association between stronger school-library staffing and stronger reading outcomes.[9] |
| **Delayed pre-k expansion** | Families may hear that new state funding is available before a new seat actually opens nearby. Even when a seat becomes available, a five-hour UPK day may not cover a parent's workday. Families need to arrange transportation and separate child care during school breaks or over the summer.[10] |

## WHY DISTRICTS ARE MAKING DIFFERENT CHOICES

Districts entered the 2026-27 budget cycle under very different financial conditions. Some faced operating costs that continued to rise faster than available revenue. Others were responding to declining enrollment, expiring federal relief, unsuccessful budget votes, or local financial management problems that developed over several years.[11]

Those differences shape both the options available to districts and the policy responses they need. Some communities have used reserves to delay reductions, while others have revised proposed budgets or adopted contingency budgets. Changes to state funding may help districts facing persistent resource gaps, while other circumstances may require stronger financial oversight or additional implementation support.[12] Whatever the immediate cause, the state has a broader responsibility to guarantee students' access to a sound basic education that does not depend on the fiscal capacity of the community where they live.

Students and families, however, experience many of these decisions in similar ways. A reduction in school staff affects the support available to students regardless of why that position was eliminated. Changes to transportation can make it harder for families to participate in school life regardless of whether those changes followed a failed budget vote, rising operating costs, or another financial pressure.

The district budgets examined in this report reflect different local circumstances, yet they raise the same broader question. When financial pressure reaches the classroom, what changes first, and what do students and families lose as a result?

# HOW BUDGET PRESSURES REACH SCHOOLS

Districts rarely close a budget gap through a single reduction. They cut positions, narrow programs offered, change transportation, delay planned investments, or use reserves to postpone deeper reductions. Students and families experience the combined effects throughout the school year, often in ways that reach beyond the classroom.[13]

The examples that follow come from districts serving a variety of communities across New York. They differ in size and geography, and they faced different financial pressures during the 2026-27 budget cycle. They also demonstrate a common pattern: When districts have fewer resources available than they need, the consequences become visible in the daily experiences of students and families.

## *Fewer Adults Available to Support Students*

For many students, the adults who work in schools are the people they turn to first when they need academic support, help navigating a difficult situation, or someone who knows them well enough to notice when something has changed in their lives. Budget decisions that reduce staffing affect much more than organizational charts. They influence the relationships students build at school and the support available throughout the day. Several districts adopted budgets that reduce staffing for the 2026-27 school year.

The table is ordered from the largest reported districtwide staffing reduction to the smallest, and districts do not all count staffing the same way. South Country reports its overall reduction in full-time-equivalent positions, as does Rochester, while Kingston and Hudson primarily report positions. The figures therefore show the scale of change within each district but should not be treated as perfectly comparable across districts.

| DISTRICT | 2026-26<br>STAFFING REDUCTION | WHAT STUDENTS MAY NOTICE |
|---|---|---|
| **South Country Central School District** | **-94.5 FTE positions**<br><br>Including 43 teachers, 10 teaching assistants, 5 administrators, 4 math positions, 4 music positions, 3 art positions, 2 elementary counselors, 1 librarian, 1 technology position, 1 family and consumer science position, and 1 special education position. Some reductions were made through attrition rather than layoffs. The district also planned to add 4 chairperson positions.[14] | Larger classes and fewer adults students can turn to for help. Reductions in counseling, library staffing, arts, and other courses can also narrow the opportunities available during the school day. Those losses can have a greater impact on students who have fewer opportunities to replace them outside school. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Kingston City School District** | **-59 positions**<br><br>About 30 were positions left vacant through retirement or attrition, while approximately 29 employees were expected to be laid off. About 62% of the eliminated positions were teaching positions and 34% were professional-support positions.[15] | Fewer teachers and support staff can mean less access to individual attention and fewer trusted adults available when students need help. Even where programs remain in place, decreased staff can make those programs harder to sustain at the same level. |
| **Hudson City School District** | **-30 positions**<br><br>Including 27 eliminated positions (12 teachers/student-support staff, 11 aides, 1 clerical position, 1 custodian, 1 building administrator). Two retiring teachers were not replaced and one vacant clerical position was left unfilled.[16] | Fewer teachers, aides, and support staff can leave students with less individual help during the school day. Those losses can have the greatest impact on students who rely on their schools for supports that may be difficult or costly to access elsewhere. |
| **Rochester City School District** | **-16.8 FTE**<br><br>Rochester reduced civil service, teaching, administrative, and building-substitute positions while adding 57 teaching assistant and 35 paraprofessional positions. The Rochester Beacon reported a net districtwide reduction of 16.8 FTE, although the published category-level figures do not reconcile exactly to that total.[17] | Students may see more teaching assistants and paraprofessionals in classrooms while having less access to counselors, social workers, and some other specialized staff. For students who rely on school-based academic, mental-health, or social support, the types of positions that are reduced matter as much as the overall staffing number. |

The scale and composition of these reductions differ substantially from one district to another. Some districts reduced staffing broadly across instructional and support roles, while others concentrated reductions in particular areas even as staffing was maintained or added elsewhere.

Across these districts, reductions in particular roles can change how much access students have to individualized attention and specialized support, as well as to adults they know and trust. That can be true even where other types of staff are being added. Research on counselors and other school support roles reinforces why the composition of staffing matters as much, if not more, than the net headcount.[18]

**When districts have fewer resources available than they need, the consequences become visible in the daily experiences of students and families.**

## *Opportunity Becomes Harder to Access*

A student's education extends beyond scheduled class periods for math and English. School libraries, music and arts programs, athletics, field trips, after-school activities, and extra academic support all help students develop new interests, strengthen relationships, and stay connected to school. Many of these opportunities also provide experiences that families cannot easily replace outside the public education system.

Budget pressure can narrow access to those opportunities in different ways. A district that offers late transportation may reduce that service, making it harder for students who rely on it to remain after school.[19] Another may postpone purchases or limit field trips. Staffing reductions can also affect enrichment beyond the classroom. Although these decisions often receive less attention than classroom staffing, they shape what students are able to experience throughout the school year.[20]

Cambridge Central School District is a small district serving two schools in Rensselaer and Washington counties.[21] A 2024 State Comptroller profile identified 51% of its students as economically disadvantaged.[22] Cambridge's contingency budget illustrates how quickly opportunities can change. After voters rejected the district's budget proposals, the Board of Education adopted a $26.8 million contingency budget for 2026-27.[23] The district reduced late-bus service and limited transportation from athletic practices to one-way service. Its budget materials also anticipated fewer field-trip opportunities and larger classes. These changes affect what students can access during and after the school day. Fewer field-trip opportunities mean fewer school-sponsored learning experiences beyond the classroom. Reduced late transportation can make it harder for students who rely on district buses to stay for activities or extra help. Larger classes can also mean fewer opportunities for individual interaction with teachers.[24]

Other districts reached similar outcomes through different decisions. Hudson City School District, centered on the small city of Hudson in Columbia County in the mid-Hudson Valley, serves a student population with substantial economic need, with a 2025 Mid-Hudson Valley Community Profile reporting that 67% of district students were economically disadvantaged.[25] In that context, Hudson reduced equipment funding alongside staffing reductions as it responded to rising operating costs,[26] while South Country reduced library staffing and other student supports as it restructured its budget following significant financial challenges.[27] Each district reflects a different local story. Together, they show how financial pressure can gradually narrow the range of opportunities available to students.

Families see these reductions when a child can no longer stay after school because transportation is unavailable, when a field trip is cancelled, or when reduced staffing limits access to the library. Each change may appear modest in a district budget, but together those changes can narrow the opportunities students have to explore their interests, build relationships, and participate fully in school life.

## *New Investments Must Become Real Opportunities*

The 2026-27 State Budget makes an important new investment in early learning by expanding access to UPK funding and making state funding for four-year-old UPK available statewide under the new allocation structure.[28] Those changes create new opportunities for communities across New York. The new statewide expansion, however, is focused on four-year-olds. Districts with existing state-supported three-year-old programs can continue to receive funding, three-year-old funding remains tied to existing base eligibility and maximum allocations. That means the new structure expands four-year-old access more broadly than three-year-old access. That distinction may be especially important for districts that already operate programs for both age groups.[29]

State funding alone does not create a classroom. Districts must be able to recruit and retain qualified educators, identify appropriate classroom space, prepare those classrooms, and meet the day-to-day costs of operating new programs. They must also coordinate with community-based early childhood providers as part of New York's mixed-delivery system. State law requires districts to set aside at least 10% of their UPK allocation to collaborate with eligible agencies, including CBOs.[30] Those challenges are likely to look different across New York. A rural district may struggle to hire certified staff, while a growing district may need additional classroom space before expanding enrollment. In other communities, demand may already exceed existing capacity, or early childhood providers may face staffing and operating constraints of their own.

Expanding that capacity will require a larger pool of qualified educators and clearer pathways for experienced early childhood staff, whose years of experience working with young children do not always translate easily into current credentialing requirements. It will also require a practical framework for more child care providers, including family child care programs, to participate in the mixed-delivery system.[31]

These implementation challenges are closely connected to the broader issues explored throughout this report.

> **Districts already responding to staffing shortages or recurring financial pressure may have fewer resources available to expand early learning quickly, even when new state funding becomes available. Families may therefore experience a gap between new state investments and the availability of local programs.**

The expansion of UPK funding also creates an important test for New York's public education and child care systems. A publicly funded pre-K seat may still leave gaps in the care a family needs across a full workday or throughout the year. A full-day UPK program can satisfy the state minimum with five hours of instruction a day, but for a parent working a longer day, a free pre-K seat can still require paid or informal care before or after school. Districts generally are not required to transport pre-K students, which means a family may be offered a seat and still have to solve how a young child gets to and from the program every day. The state requires UPK programs to operate for at least 180 days. A program operating on the school-year calendar can therefore leave families needing a separate child care arrangement during school breaks and over the summer. These gaps create an unresolved tension between expanding pre-K as a public education program and meeting families' broader child care needs.[32] Whether new funding results in more classrooms and greater access for families will depend on whether districts have the staff, facilities, and ongoing operating resources needed to put those investments into practice. Following implementation over the coming years will help identify where additional state action is still needed. It will also provide a clearer picture of the conditions districts need in order to translate new funding into opportunities that families can actually use.[33]

| WHAT DISTRICTS EXPERIENCED | WHAT STUDENTS AND FAMILIES EXPERIENCED |
|---|---|
| **Hudson's** health-insurance costs increased 14.03% while total state aid increased 0.33% | Fewer adults available in schools |
| **South Country** exceeded its voter-approved budget by ~$3.49 million | Less counseling and library staffing, fewer classroom staff, and fewer arts and other course opportunities |
| **Cambridge** adopted a contingency budget after two unsuccessful votes | 21 positions cut, late-bus service reduced, athletic-practice transportation limited, and bus runs consolidated |
| **West Valley** adopted a contingency budget after its revised proposal failed 161-243 | Existing staffing and student programs are expected to continue, but equipment purchases, overnight trips, and program expansions are expected to be removed or postponed |
| **Mount Vernon** and **Hoosic Valley** revised budgets after community response | Approval of revised budgets avoided the additional contingency-budget reductions the districtshad identified |

Districts entered this budget cycle with different levels of student need and different financial pressures. The educational consequences, however, often looked remarkably similar. Students may return to fewer adults they rely on, opportunities may become harder to access, and some communities will face greater barriers to expanding early learning.

### *Different Pressures With Similar Consequences.*

The districts highlighted in this report entered the 2026-27 budget cycle under a variety of financial circumstances. Hudson reported a 14.03% increase in health insurance costs while state aid increased by 0.33%. South Country closed the previous year with expenditures wexceeding its voter-approved budget by approximately $3.49 million. Cambridge and West Valley adopted contingency budgets after unsuccessful budget votes, while Mount Vernon and Hoosic Valley revised their budgets and avoided deeper reductions through a second vote.

Although these districts arrived at their specific budget pressures in different ways, the effects often converged around access to adults and transportation, as well as planned school opportunities. Several districts reduced staffing or other supports, while others revised budgets in ways that avoided deeper cuts. Those patterns suggest that the question facing policymakers extends beyond any single district. The question is whether every community has the resources needed to maintain the conditions students rely on throughout the school year.

## WHEN BUDGET PRESSURE MEETS EXISTING INEQUITIES

Budget reductions do not affect every community in the same way. Families with greater incomes, flexible work schedules, private transportation, or access to outside services may be able to replace some of what schools can no longer provide by paying privately for tutoring, transportation, child care, counseling, enrichment, or other supports. Many other families, however, do not have the money, time, transportation, or flexibility to fill such gaps.

When public schools lose staff, transportation, programs, or other supports, students in communities with fewer resources have fewer alternatives. These losses can deepen racial and economic inequities that already shape access to educational opportunity across New York. In that way, broader wealth inequities can become inequities in educational opportunity.

New York's school funding system recognizes that districts begin from different circumstances through Foundation Aid and the State Education Department's Need/Resource Capacity categories. [34]Those measures reflect a basic principle of educational equity, that districts with different levels of student need and local fiscal capacity require different levels of support to provide meaningful access to educational opportunity. Public investment is one of the ways New York can reduce the extent to which differences in private and local wealth shape the opportunities available to children. The budgets examined in this report show that important gaps remain between that principle and the resources available to many communities.

Many districts serving students with greater needs also have less local fiscal capacity to absorb rising costs. A funding system rooted in racial and economic justice must account for those differences and prevent students' opportunities from depending on the wealth or fiscal capacity of the community where they live. Doing so requires both directing greater public resources toward communities with greater need and making sure that the state raises sufficient revenue to sustain those investments.

# WHAT THESE DISTRICTS TELL US ABOUT NEW YORK'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Statewide funding totals do not fully explain the conditions students experience when schools reopen. Students notice when trusted adults are no longer available, when transportation changes, or when opportunities become harder to access. District budgets show how statewide policy decisions and local financial pressures become part of students' daily lives.

They also show that budget pressure does not fall evenly across New York. Districts with greater local resources often have more flexibility to absorb rising costs, while communities with fewer resources may struggle to protect staffing, sustain programs, or implement new investments such as UPK. State policy must account for those differences if every community is to provide the conditions students need to learn and participate fully in school.[35] The purpose of statewide public investment is after all, in part, to keep unequal local wealth from becoming unequal educational opportunity.

School funding also does not operate in isolation from the other costs communities and public institutions must carry. Health insurance is one example, where the cost of providing essential benefits to school employees may rise faster than important revenue sources, such that new funding may provide less additional capacity than headline school aid numbers might suggest. Taking this example alone, the policy challenge should not be to reduce workers' access to health care in order to fund schools, but to finance public systems in ways that allow communities to sustain both.

## *Building a Funding System That Better Supports Students*

The district budgets examined in this report point to a challenge that extends beyond any one community. Districts should not have to reduce the adults, services, and opportunities students rely on in order to manage recurring financial pressure. When districts make those reductions, students and families carry the consequences.

The 2026-27 State Budget makes important investments in Foundation Aid and UPK. Those investments can expand opportunities for students and families, but the district budgets highlighted throughout this report show that many communities continue to face pressures that threaten staffing, transportation, programming, and the implementation of new early-learning programs.

Future state budgets should continue strengthening Foundation Aid so districts can maintain staffing and respond to changing student needs. The state must also provide sustained operating support for early learning so districts can recruit and retain staff, prepare classrooms, and make new seats available to families. Funding decisions should reflect the different financial circumstances districts face and the unequal resources communities can draw on locally. Public schools are a shared civic responsibility, and the opportunities available to a child should not depend on how much wealth or fiscal capacity their community can draw on.

New York must also raise sufficient progressive revenue to sustain these investments over time. Progressive revenue is part of an educational equity strategy because it allows the state to make sustained public investments without asking communities with the fewest resources to carry the greatest burden. The Invest in Our New York proposals provide concrete options for establishing more progressive personal income tax rates at the highest income levels and raising rates on the most profitable corporations.[36] These proposals would ask the wealthiest New Yorkers and the most profitable corporations, who have the greatest ability to contribute, to help fund the public systems that communities across the state depend on.

State leaders can continue allowing recurring fiscal pressure to become local austerity, with the deepest consequences falling on communities already confronting racial and economic inequity, while leaving additional progressive revenue untapped, or they can raise the revenue needed to protect staffing, transportation, programming, and access to early learning. A funding system rooted in justice should treat public education as a shared social responsibility and give every district the resources to sustain the labor and opportunities students rely on, without making those opportunities depend on local wealth.

# APPENDIX

| DISTRICT | NYSED NEED CATEGORY | FISCAL PRESSURE | KEY NUMBERS | BUDGET RESPONSE | WHAT STUDENTS & FAMILIES EXPERIENCE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rochester | 2 | A $61 million gap projected for 2027-28 in the district's long-range forecast | Enrollment projected to rise by 493; 10 fewer social workers, 8.5 fewer counselors, 3 fewer school safety officers, and 11 fewer Center for Youth positions | Some student-support positions were reduced even as the district added teaching assistants and paraprofessionals in other areas. Home and Hospital Instruction is being restructured, with one-to-one instruction retained when required by a student's IEP and small-group synchronous instruction planned where feasible. | Fewer student supports available during the school day |
| Hudson | 4 | Operating and employee-benefit costs rising faster than available revenue | Foundation Aid remains flat; total state aid rises by $88,941 (0.33%), while health-insurance costs rise by $1.46 million (14.03%) | Funding was reduced for instructional administration, instructional media, pupil services, and transportation | Fewer adults in schools and reduced school capacity |
| South Country | 5 | Multi-year financial management and oversight problems, structural budget imbalances, and reliance on temporary funding for recurring expenses | The district exceeded its 2024-25 voter-approved budget by approximately $3.49 million; the revised 2026-27 budget is $2.32 million below the prior-year budget | The district reported eliminating 94.5 FTE positions through reductions made during the current school year and proposed for 2026-27. The revised budget passed on revote. | Reduced academic and student support |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kingston | 3 | Declining enrollment and rising transportation, special-education, and BOCES costs | $258.08 million budget approved; 59 positions eliminated, with about 30 reductions occurring through retirement or attrition and approximately 29 employees expected to be laid off | The district reported maintaining existing programs and services while reducing staffing across teaching and professional-support roles. | Fewer instructional supports available |
| Cambridge | 5 | Budget proposal defeated twice, resulting in a contingency budget | $26.8 million contingency budget; 21 positions cut | Late-bus service reduced; transportation from athletic practices limited to one-way service; at least two bus runs consolidated; equipment allocations and bus purchases eliminated. | Less access to school experiences beyond the classroom |
| West Valley | 5 | Revised budget defeated on revote, triggering a contingency budget | Revised budget failed 161-243; transportation and capital reserve propositions also failed | Existing staffing, student programs, transportation, athletics, clubs, music, and curriculum-based field trips are expected to continue. The minivan purchase, new reserve contributions, equipment purchases, overnight student trips, and program expansions are expected to be removed or postponed. | Community experienced more limited local options |
| Mount Vernon | 3 | Initial budget proposal defeated by voters and revised | Revised $275.54 million budget approved 1161-1075 after spending was reduced by $699,293 | The district reported that the revised budget maintained student, family, and community services. Its approval avoided the deeper reductions that would have accompanied a contingency budget. | Community advocacy changed the final outcome |
| Hoosic Valley | 5 | Initial budget proposal defeated, leading the district to reduce its proposed tax levy increase to the tax cap | Revised $24.94 million budget approved 367-219 | Approval of the revised budget avoided the additional staffing and program reductions the district had identified under a possible contingency budget. | Community advocacy prevented deeper reductions |

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