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Modify tax cap so schoolchildren won't bear the burden

By Lori Caplan and Robert Horan, Commentary Published 5:10 pm, Tuesday, December 22, 2015

Most New Yorkers can agree on two things: They want relief from high property taxes, and they want high-quality schools for their children and grandchildren.

They don't want to have to choose between the two.

Yet across the state, school districts are bracing for another round of potentially devastating budget cuts, because New York's so-called "2 percent" tax cap is actually shaping up to be a "zero percent" cap on school tax levy increases in many districts for the year ahead.

That's because a key step in the tax cap formula limits levy growth to either 2 percent or the change in the Consumer Price Index, whichever is less. CPI growth will be far less, when it's calculated at year's end. Through October, it had moved just two-hundredths of 1 percent. Although tax caps vary by district due to other factors in the formula, the result is that many districts will be hard-pressed to raise local revenue to support student programs.

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While some may cheer the prospect of a school tax increase close to zero, it won't come without a steep cost to our public schools and the children we serve.

The governor and state lawmakers have some serious choices ahead. Will they step up with additional school aid to compensate for what looks to be a de-facto local tax freeze in many districts? Will they deliver long-promised mandate relief? Or perhaps this is the year that they will consider sensible modifications to the overly complex

this is the year that they will consider sensible modifications to the overly complex tax cap formula – make 2 percent actually mean 2 percent.

We believe it's time to do the latter, remove the volatility of CPI from the formula and make the growth factor a consistent 2 percent. Consider:

- Many voters believe this is what they were promised. The zero percent scenario was absent from campaign materials and statements heralding the popular "2 percent cap."
- The prior year's CPI is a flawed measure on which to base future plans. Schools need to budget for the students who will be in our classrooms next year.
- Schools are just beginning to bounce back from the Great Recession, when the education workforce was reduced by an estimated 30,000 people. This year, thanks to elected officials making education a priority, many districts were finally able to restore some teaching positions. This tax cap flaw threatens to undo this progress.

More Information

Watervliet City School District Superintendent Lori Caplan and Schodack Central School Superintendent Bob Horan chair the superintendent's legislative committees of Capital Region and Quester III BOCES, respectively. This was submitted on behalf of the 47 school districts in the two BOCES regions.

- The tax cap is uniquely restrictive for schools, which – unlike most other branches of government – must hold public budget votes and gain a 60 percent supermajority to exceed their limit. Further, it's ultimately schoolchildren who will pay the price when districts, once again, are forced to cut programs and services.

Not long ago, proponents of the tax cap were touting

Massachusetts as a model. New York's cap bears no resemblance to that of Massachusetts, where local governments can count on 2.5 percent each year.

In New York, the lack of stability undermines long-term fiscal planning and improvement efforts. Meanwhile, schools have been tasked with an unprecedented reform agenda. We are supposed to be scaling up to prepare students for the intense

demands of a new global economy.

School superintendents support property tax relief, but it shouldn't come at the expense of New York's students. We need state policies that allow for responsible fiscal planning and sustainability. Simple, sensible modifications to the tax cap would be a good start.

Of all the choices before lawmakers, the worst choice is to do nothing, and force school leaders to make another round of devastating cuts to the people, programs and services that our communities value and our children need.

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