96% of budgets win voter approval

By Cathy Woodruff
SENIOR WRITER

In the first year of a state-imposed property tax cap, voters approved a hefty 96.4 percent of proposed school budgets on May 15.

Among districts where tax increases were proposed at or below the cap and the traditional simple majority was required for passage, a remarkable 99 percent of budgets passed. Margins of victory in many districts were reported to be unusually wide, and turnout was said to be strong.

“Voters recognized that school leaders did everything they could to comply with the spirit and intent of the property tax levy cap,” said NYSSBA Executive Director Timothy G. Kremer. “They were responsive to their communities.”

But only 60 percent of budgets passed in districts where school boards asked for approval of tax levies above the cap, which required a supermajority of 60 percent of voter approval.

Cap-exceeding winners included suburban Bethlehem district in Albany County, where a record turnout lifted the budget to a 62 percent approval. Holland Central School District in Erie County won 65 percent support. There, the cap would have limited levy growth to less than half a percent.

“Districts that exceeded the cap took a calculated risk, and most read their communities correctly,” Kremer said. “What we learned in this vote was that if you stayed within the cap, you were virtually guaranteed passage.”

Throughout the state, 24 of 675 proposed budgets were defeated. Of the budgets that did not pass, 19 (79.2 percent) sought to exceed the cap. Districts with defeated budgets may opt to seek voter approval again on June 19 (see timeline, page 15).

Principals cry foul over state tests

By Cathy Woodruff
SENIOR WRITER

New York’s race to ramp up reliance on student testing for evaluating educators is bringing out an unprecedented rebellious streak among school principals.

A grassroots group that started on Long Island, New York Principals, has emerged as the loyal opposition to the push by state lawmakers and the Board of Regents to beef up testing.

“We feel that our schools and our instructional practices are being taken over by testing that is not valuable in any way,” elementary school Principal Sharon Emick Fougner of Great Neck Public Schools told On Board. “It really goes against everything that we believe about what good teaching practices look like.”

This month, Fougner sent a blistering critique of this year’s elementary math exams to Education Commissioner John B. King Jr. (see text, page 5).

In a media-savvy move, New York Principals released results of an unscientific online survey of 8,000 parents who say they, too, worry about New York’s move toward higher-stakes testing. According to the principals, nearly 80 percent of responding parents said test preparation had prevented their children from engaging in meaningful school activities.

One message of the group is that children are being harmed by high levels of stress stemming from the exams, which will be used in teacher and principal evaluations. In the online survey, some 4,000 parents offered comments and anecdotes, including reports that their children...
children showed physical symptoms of test anxiety such as tics, asthma attacks, acid reflux and vomiting.

Parents surveyed also noted sleep disruption and crying, feelings of failure that increased as tests progressed, refusals to go to school and complaints of boredom and restlessness from students who finished early and were required to sit still for the full 90 minutes.

The Albany-based School Administrators Association of New York State – an individual membership organization that provides legal representation, labor relations, legislative advocacy and professional development services – has not officially endorsed the group’s position papers, which can be found online at www.newyorkprincipals.org. But SAANYS has “a friendly awareness” of what the group’s members are doing “at a grassroots level,” said Michelle Hebert, associate executive director at SAANYS.

SAANYS honored one of the organizers of the grassroots group, Carol Burris, in 2010 as the association’s Educator of the Year. Burris is principal of South Side High School in Rockville Centre and a former president of the school board in East Rockaway in Nassau County.

“We are concerned about putting the wrong drivers in the seat of educational policy and practice,” Burris said of the increased emphasis on standardized testing during an interview with On Board.

“There are going to be a whole lot of unintended consequences that come out of this change.”

Close to 1,500 principals from around the state have signed on to an extensively footnoted, persuasively worded “open letter” drafted late last year by Burris and Wheatley School Principal Sean C. Feeney of the East Williston district. The paper is critical of the state’s developing teacher and principal evaluation program and its implications for children.

“We believe that it is our ethical obligation as principals to express our deep concerns about the recently implemented Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) regulations,” Burris and Feeney wrote. “These regulations are seriously flawed, and our schools and students will bear the brunt of their poor design.”

Up to 40 percent of teacher ratings may be based on data from state tests. Under a deal brokered by Gov. Andrew Cuomo, districts face a July 1 deadline to submit locally negotiated APPR agreements to the Education Department for approval, and the agreements must be approved and substantially implemented by Jan. 17 for districts to receive their state aid increases for 2013.

Now, with the recent completion of the spring math and English language arts testing cycle for students in grades 3-8 and an avalanche of criticism about the quality of test questions, the principals have issued a new open letter of concern to the Board of Regents.

Signed by 14 administrators including Burris, Fougner and Feeney, the letter criticized the 90-minute duration of the tests as “exhausting for young students.”

They described the testing cycle as “a nightmare for New York students in grades 3-8, their teachers and their principals.” They added: “We cannot ignore deep-seated social problems while blindly believing that the new tests, data warehousing systems and unproven evaluation systems are the answer. That view, in our opinion, is irresponsible and unethical.”

Why the sharp tone? Burris said it reflects the strong sentiments of principals, who are well-versed in educational theory and practice and who work personally with parents, teachers and students.

“I understand systems. That’s my job,” Burris said, “I understand what makes my high school work better.”

The activist principals also say the state is moving too quickly to impose a radically new evaluation system.

“My gosh, it seems to be slapped together,” Principal Mario Fernandez of Stillwater High School in Saratoga County told New York Times reporter Michael Winerip in November. “They’re expecting a tornado to go through a junkyard and have a brand new Mercedes pop up.”

NYSSBA has generally supported the Regents’ efforts.

“It makes sense to evaluate teachers and principals based on student results, and it was necessary to move quickly to receive Race to the Top money,” said NYSSBA Executive Timothy G. Kremer.

“But errors on tests are really troubling. School boards will be making personnel decisions based on test results, so everyone has a vested interest in making sure these tests are designed and scored properly.”

On Board contacted State Education Department officials for comment but did not receive a response before going to press.