



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

John W. Mannion

## Rural school districts push back on Gov. Hochul's plan for funding, facing big cuts

SENATOR JOHN W. MANNION January 24, 2024

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For the past few years as New York State worked towards "fully funding" Foundation Aid for schools in 2023, Jordan-Elbridge Superintendent Jim Froio has wanted to see a change to the formula. He and other critics have noted that nearly half of all districts statewide have been getting increases that fall far below the rise of inflation.

Now, Gov. Kathy Hochul is announcing formula changes that make the problem worse in Froio's eyes. They represent functional cuts for Jordan-Elbridge and dozens of other rural districts.

"If things go unchecked, I think what you're going to see across the state is a divide between the haves and the have nots, the have nots are going to be predominantly rural schools across New York State," Froio said.

Last week, Hochul proposed a \$35.3 billion school aid package, a 2.4% increase from last year's \$34 billion budget, including an increase in the total amount of Foundation Aid provided. However, Gov. Hochul's office is proposing changes to who gets what based on dropping enrollment figures and the idea that poorer, larger districts need more assistance. The first change is an adjustment for inflation that critics still say is far below what schools face when it comes to rising costs; the second would effectively do away with a provision called "save harmless," which is meant to ensure the amount of aid provided to a district is not smaller than what a district received the year before.

Rural districts take the hardest hit under the proposal. Jordan-Elbridge faces a 1.2% cut, which Froio said translates to about \$300,000. He acknowledges that others face much more drastic cuts; down the road in Cayuga County, the Southern Cayuga CSD could lose 15% of

its foundation aid, amounting to a \$1,092,288 hit. The Union Springs CSD could lose 13%, a \$1,027,584 hit.

During a board meeting Monday night, Southern Cayuga CSD leaders tried to make sense of the impact of losing over \$1 million in funding for a district that serves just 750 kids.

"Given Southern Cayuga's commitment to maintaining the lowest tax rate in the region, coupled with an anticipated tax cap of 1.1%, I foresee a challenging transition ahead," Superintendent Patrick Jensen told CNY Central in an email.

City and larger suburban districts will still see increases, but leaders in some of those districts are still critical of Gov. Hochul's proposal.

"While we recognize that this is the beginning of budget negotiations between the state legislature and governor's office, our team in Liverpool is disappointed with the governor's executive budget," Liverpool Superintendent Daniel Henner said in part in a statement.

Liverpool is anticipating a 2% increase of about \$1,319,658; the Syracuse City School District is set to gain a 3% increase in Foundation Aid of \$11,121,045. Still, Syracuse Superintendent Anthony Davis joins his counterpart in Liverpool in hopes that state lawmakers will deliver further increases, hoping to avoid drowning in ongoing staffing shortages and other issues.

"I'm always concerned, but we have a lot of folks that are advocating for us and our district. So, I'm convinced that we will find ways to make sure that our kids and families get what they need," Davis said.

Overall, about 26 districts the Central New York region are expected to lose Foundation Aid funds under the current proposal. New York spends more per student than any other state in the nation, but advocates like Deputy Director of the NYS Council of School Superintendents Robert Lowry argue the costs correspond with the heightened role that districts are forced to play to help keep students healthy.

"The districts are serving fewer students, but they're doing more for their students and their families," Lowry said. "Things like mental health services, healthcare, childcare, after-school care."

Legislators are likely to make education funding a central issue as budget negotiations begin. Senator John Mannion, a former teacher representing parts of Onondaga and Oswego Counties, said that these formula changes may have been well intentioned, but will hurt schools as written.

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*"I'll be fighting to have those numbers back to what the projected numbers were in November," Sen. Mannion said.*

He's likely to find allies in this fight across the aisle. Assemblyman John Lemondes, a Republican representing much of Cayuga County, agrees that the formula changes have been done the wrong way.

"I think we need to go back to the drawing board. This is significantly hurting schools, especially those that are suburban and rural," Lemondes said.

Both lawmakers agree that the Foundation Aid formula should be adjusted, but disagree with how Gov. Hochul's proposal. Sen. Mannion suggested the formation of a task force to get it right for schools across the board.

View the article [here](#).