



What the state budget means to you

The final state budget for 2014-15 is far from perfect, but advocacy by NYSUT members, leaders and staff definitely made a difference in the outcome.

“There’s much to be proud of in this budget,” said NYSUT Executive Vice President Andy Pallotta. “But this session is far from over and we are working to fix what we can and

minimize what we cannot.”

The union stopped a back-door voucher scheme; gained \$1.5 billion in education aid, including \$340 million for universal pre-K; stopped student data from being transmitted to inBloom; secured limits on the use of testing; gained more aid for college students; stopped a hike in retiree contributions for Medicare;

ensured charter schools can be audited; and finally gained the long-sought Safe Patient Handling Act to protect health care workers. (See story, page 28.)

Public higher education gained \$75 per FTE student in community college base aid. Hospital aid increased and legislators rejected privatizing SUNY Downstate

Medical Center.

The budget contains a ban on pre-K–2 standardized testing; limits on time devoted to testing and a moratorium on the use of state tests for certain consequences for students. The union also was able to stop charter school access to state building aid.

— Ned Hoskin

Education aid up, but not enough

Including the \$340 million in state funding for universal pre-kindergarten, the total increase in education aid went up about \$1.5 billion. That’s nearly double what Gov. Cuomo originally proposed but far below the \$1.9 billion required to avoid further cuts to programs and staff. It includes \$14 million for teacher centers, money for the National Board Certification program and a mentor/intern program, as well as \$25 million for the Teachers of Tomorrow program.

Back-door voucher scheme

The final budget does not include the proposed and deceptively named Education Investment Tax Credit that was nothing more than a back-door voucher for families who choose to spend their own money to send their children to private and parochial schools.

Charter schools can be audited

Stemming from a recent state Supreme Court decision, the budget includes language that deems charter schools political subdivisions so they can be fully subject to audits by city and state comptrollers. Also, upon dissolution, as charter schools have been known to do relatively suddenly, remaining money must be returned to the contributing school district. Unfortunately, Gov. Cuomo, the charter schools’ new biggest champion, pushed through a new provision that a school district must permit any charter school to co-locate and use services and facilities of public schools without cost, on demand.

Dangerous teacher excellence fund

The final budget establishes a problematic \$10 million teacher excellence fund for teachers who are rated “highly effective” according to their collectively bargained APPR plan. It would provide up to \$20,000 in a year-to-year supplement. Merit pay schemes like this have always been disruptive to collaboration, team culture and morale in the workplace.

Limits on testing

The budget addressed many of NYSUT’s concerns with testing. It bans standardized testing of students in pre-K through second grade; it establishes a moratorium on high-stakes consequences from standardized tests for students; it limits time spent on exams and reduces the number of assessments schools can use. It also stops the sharing of test data with inBloom, which subsequently has decided to close down its operations.

Harmful property tax freeze

A modified version of the governor’s three-year real property tax “freeze” credit scheme is still disastrous for districts and communities. Taxpayers in districts and municipalities that stay under the oppressive tax cap will receive rebates for any tax levy increase. The plan also allows entities to receive credit for previous efforts at shared services and efficiencies.

Gains for higher education

Increases by \$7.6 million state operating aid to SUNY state-operated campuses; and an increase of \$75 per full-time student for SUNY and CUNY community college base aid. Community college child care center funding increased by \$653,000 for SUNY and \$544,000 for CUNY. At SUNY, \$1.3 million for the Educational Opportunity Program; at CUNY, \$1.1 million for Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge and \$1 million to Joseph Murphy Institute for adult learners; and at CUNY community colleges, \$1.7 million restored to Accelerated Studies in Associate Programs; for private colleges, \$749,000 to Higher Education Opportunity Program. The Tuition Assistance Program maximum award increases by \$165, to \$5,165.

SUNY hospitals

Removes language that would have opened the door to privatizing SUNY hospitals, including the vulnerable Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn. Union advocacy gained \$27.5 million in additional funds to SUNY’s three teaching hospitals.