

Pittsford fights for full-day kindergarten

Full-day

Lauren Peace Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Nobody in Pittsford is more on edge waiting for lawmakers in Albany to finalize the state budget for the new fiscal year than the parents of 5-year-olds or the schools superintendent, at the very least.

State officials have spent the past week crunching numbers behind closed doors to determine where to allot more than \$160 billion, which could serve to fund everything from medicaid to property tax relief, but the focus in Pittsford is set on school aid, which the district is asking for to help implement full-day kindergarten during the 2018-19 school year.

Pittsford Central School District is one of only five districts in New York without full-day kindergarten, and Superintendent Michael Pero said students are suffering because of the shorter day.

“It’s not just a hunch or a guess. We’ve looked at our benchmark data for our kindergarten cohorts to see how they’re doing on reading assessments at the end of the year compared to the schools in our area that have gone to full-day kindergarten,” Pero said. “Our students are about 18 percent less proficient in their reading, and we’re seeing that gap widen over time.”

The current half-day program demands that teachers fit much more instruction into the limited time with students, and therefore leaves little to no time for social exploration and creative play. Pero said the time limitations also makes it impossible for the district to offer these students classes in physical education, art and music.

“That more well-rounded program isn’t there for us right now,” he said.

So why, in one of the state’s more affluent districts, can the school district not come up with program funding?

“The majority of other schools that went to full-day kindergarten never had to contend with a tax cap,” Pero said.

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Where’s the money?

In 2015, Pittsford announced it would consider expanding to full-day kindergarten beginning in the 2017-18 school year. But, in April of last year, the proposed budget raised the property tax cap levy by 4.7 percent, well above the state-imposed tax cap of 2.7 percent.

A 60 percent ‘yes’ vote was needed to override the cap, instead of the typical 50, but when voters took the polls in May only about 54 percent of voters approved. “One of the biggest problems that we had last year was that if you exceed the tax cap, then a penalty is that tax payers do not receive their rebate checks from the state. And

so that was a huge deterrent for people,” said Pero. “A very high percent, based on our surveys and exit polls, of the people want and support full-day K, but they do not want full-day K if it means exceeding the tax cap, and there’s a reluctance for full-day K if it means jeopardizing any other program.” So the budget failed, and voters returned to polls in mid-June to vote on a second adopted budget, which they passed, sending Pittsford kindergartners to half-day programs for at least another year. According to Pero, the two greatest problems the district faces are that the tax cap is often low, as low as 0.5 percent a few years back, and Pittsford receives little state aid. “It makes growth nearly impossible without significant program cuts, and so it puts us in a unique position,” said Pero. “We receive the lowest amount of foundation aid annually, by percentage across New York state.” That’s what he’s been campaigning to change in Albany.

The deal

In July 2017, Gov. Andrew Cuomo promised to support the implementation of full-day kindergarten for all students in New York state by providing sufficient start-up funding, as well as longterm financial support to sustain a full-day kindergarten program at Pittsford.

Since then, Pittsford began to ramp up the focus of its advocacy committee by interviewing parents, teachers and administrators, and defining its goals around full-day kindergarten. The district’s first move was to host a forum which resulted in a petition to Cuomo asking for fair and equitable funding. That petition gained more than 2,000 signatures within the first 24 hours, Pero said. Through winter, the district’s full-day kindergarten advocates worked to meet with local legislators, as well as Cuomo, and in late winter, Pero traveled to Albany to report to the Senate Budget Committee. “While there we also visited with some members of the Assembly, and then I was called back to a second trip to do a followup budget presentation,” Pero said. “As of late, we have brought our attention back to the governor’s office with a letterwriting and phone-calling campaign.”

But the promise is set in nothing more than good faith until the final budget is announced. Pero and the rest of the district are waiting anxiously to learn whether or not they’ll receive the funding necessary to switch kindergarten to full-day. “It’s a coin toss, to be very candid. It becomes complicated because you never know what’s going to be in the budget until it’s out,” Pero said. He went on to explain that some language in the initial executive budget Cuomo presented indicated possible shifts in the burden of cost for extended school year services for students with special needs back to the schools instead of state aid. That would yield approximately a \$400,000 deficit in Pittsford. “It really comes down to scrutinizing what the true budget finally is,” said Pero. An ideal outcome, according to Pero, would mean a five-year incentive for full-day kindergarten, which means five years of additional funding to help support the launch of the program. He also said he is hopeful the budget will include more generous aid for the district.

In the governor’s initial budget, Pittsford would receive an additional \$23,000 in aid, which is the near equivalent of a 0.25 percent increase.

No funding, no full-day kindergarten

“We’ve done two things parallel during this budget season,” said Pero. “The first thing that we’ve done is we made sure that we had a balanced budget that’s at the tax cap or under for our base budget, which we’re at right now.” Pero said the board made a pledge to the community that they would not override the tax cap this year, and so effort was focused on the advocacy for full-day kindergarten support.

“We have all of the stuff ready to be ordered, we have our teachers curriculum in good shape, but what we need is for the state to come through with the funding that they promised,” Pero said.

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.com Includes reporting by staff writer Justin Murphy.



Milo Fosberry plays with a toy truck during kindergarten class at Jefferson Road Elementary School.

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