Pittsford planning all-day kindergarten

Full day

Tax levy rise of 4.7 percent sought; override vote May 16

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This past Wednesday, as on most days, the 5-year-olds at Jefferson Road Elementary School in Pittsford accomplished about as much as they possibly could in half a school day.

They read aloud, and rehearsed poems and songs for an upcoming recital. They went to see a play about respect and teamwork. They took turns with a stuffed owl named Baby Echo, mounted on the end of a stick, pointing as they spelled out three-letter words.


“When I started (kindergarten), I was afraid I would do some wrong things, but now I know it’s OK,” student Lily Winter said. “We do a lot of fun stuff.”

You can only fit so much fun stuff into two and a half hours, though, and that’s all the time Pittsford 5-year-olds have for now. It’s one of the only districts in New York not to offer full-day kindergarten. After several years of study and consideration, it hopes to change that in

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Clockwise from left, kindergartners Maxwell Gough, his twin brother Aiden, Milo Fosberry and Rory O'Connor pretend to ride a firetruck during class at Jefferson Road Elementary School in Pittsford.

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2017-18. One major hurdle stands in the way: the new spending is part of a $134 million budget that would raise the property tax levy by 4.7 percent, well above the state-imposed tax cap of 2.7 percent. That means the proposal must get approval from 60 percent of district voters May 16 for it to go into effect.

The full-day kindergarten implementation will cost about $3.9 million the first year, of which local taxpayers will need to fund about $1.5 million. The budget is further stressed by $2 million of interest payments that have come due from a $43 million capital project voters approved back in 2012.

“Sometimes you’re dealt a hand and you have to do the best you can,” Superintendent Michael Pero said of the factors behind the increase. “Explaining it is a little more difficult, but we need to champion the positives for our community.” For full-day kindergarten, Pittsford need only point to 99 percent of the other school districts in the state. You can count those without a full day for 5-year-olds on two hands. West Irondequoit and Rush-Henrietta have started it recently and Brighton is on its way. A survey of neighboring districts showed that Pittsford provides remedial reading instruction to significantly more of its first-graders, a sign that some are losing ground in kindergarten.

One common concern is that 5-year-olds won’t have the stamina for a full day, but kindergarten teacher Julie Wilson said that most of her half-day students have another organized program for the rest of the day anyway. “We’re not really looking to ramp up the curriculum,” she said. “It will just be more time to reinforce things, to play, to have down time. ... We just can’t fit it all in right now.”

The record of local districts seeking to override the tax cap is mixed. In 2014, West Irondequoit voters twice did not provide a supermajority of votes, and the district needed to fall back on a state-prescribed “austerity budget,” as Pittsford would if the same thing were to happen this year.

Brighton voters easily approved an override in 2014, though, and Victor voters did the same in 2016. Statewide, there were 36 override attempts in 2016, 28 of which were successful.

The last time a Pittsford schools budget failed was in May 1990, when voters rejected a 7.5 percent tax levy increase by a 27-vote margin. A second, scaled-down proposal passed narrowly the following month.

“We used to go out all the time with 6 or 7 percent (increases),” said School Board President Kim McCluski, a 20-year board veteran. “Now, we get not-great state aid, and to (maintain programming) we have to go over the cap.”

The district has squeezed about $4 million out of the budget elsewhere, mostly by downsizing through attrition as enrollment falls. Pero pointed...
out that last year’s tax cap of less than 1 percent has exacerbated this year’s predicament, as some expenses were put off through use of reserves.

The district has done polling on whether residents would be willing to exceed the tax cap in order to pay for full-day kindergarten. The responses have been precariously close to 60 percent; the bar to be cleared. “There really is no good year to do this,” Pero said. “We’ve tried to get to the community’s comfort level. ... Given the obstacles, I feel this is a very responsible budget for our kids and our community.”

The vote is from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesday, May 16 at Barker Road Middle School, 75 Barker Road. More information on the budget is available at the district’s website, www.pittsfordschools.org.

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Principal Shawn Clark talks to kindergartners, including Maci Pittinaro, at Jefferson Road Elementary School.

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