

An extra billion? Hold the tax hike

LI school districts should use this huge windfall to give taxpayers a break

BY KYLE STROBER

Few institutions have been entrusted with as much power in our region as the Long Island school districts now being presented by Washington and Albany with a massive \$1.27 billion boost in pandemic-era funding.

Educators vow these new dollars will allow funding for after-school tutoring, expanded summer schools and prekindergarten classes, which is all well and good. However, at the same time they receive this historic financial windfall, school districts must be subjected to rigorous, independent financial scrutiny, as well as audits and penalties, if they seek to hike taxes on incredulous property owners.

It is not an idle demand. A recent Newsday report reveals that Long Island school districts have accumulated a record \$2.61 billion in reserves, or “rainy day accounts,” for the 2020-2021 school year. This amount, on average, represents nearly 20% of the schools’

projected annual spending. It is a documented reminder of just how much overtaxation occurs by LI schools, cloaked under the guise of benefiting our children’s education.

Representing some of the largest property taxpayers on Long Island, the Association for a Better Long Island (ABLI) has called on New York State to require school districts to utilize newly available financial and budgetary flexibility options that unlock their reserve funds, as well as use the new billions in state and federal aid, before proposing a tax hike.

That mandate would come at a time when Albany has recognized the pandemic-induced threat facing every government entity funded by the taxpayer. Last year, the state passed legislation, endorsed by Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli and signed into law by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, that gives financial and budgetary flexibility to local governments to provide critical services during the COVID-19 public health crisis.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO / SIBERIANART

Made up of three components, the law:

- extends the “rollover” period for bond anticipation notes issued in calendar years 2015 through 2021
- authorizes local governments and school districts to spend or temporarily transfer money in reserve funds for COVID-19 pandemic-related

expenses

- permits the repayment of interfund advances made for COVID-19 pandemic-related expenses by the end of the next succeeding fiscal year or later, rather than the end of the current fiscal year.

Also, school districts were relieved of the restrictions placed on the various categories of reserve funds, thereby “unlocking” reserve funds to address budget shortfalls or additional costs as a result of COVID-19.

In addition to a mandate that schools use their reserve funds first, DiNapoli, as comptroller and New York State’s fiscal watchdog, ought to conduct an audit of the utilization of reserve funds within each Long Island school district to ensure that administrators are truly tapping these funds for our region’s rainiest of days, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now that Albany has lifted restrictions placed on the various categories of reserve funds, and \$1.27 billion is about to be deposited into their collective bank accounts, school boards need to dismiss even the passing thought of a tax increase to be borne by Long Island property owners.

For once, it’s time for schools to first reach into their own pockets before those of Long Island residents.



Kyle Strober is the executive director of the Association for a Better Long Island.



Aerial view of the never-opened Shoreham nuclear plant in 2015.

opportunities, and help launch a green economic recovery in years to come. All New Yorkers benefit from a cleaner and more sustainable infrastructure. Let’s all pay our fair share.

Pat Guidice, Holtsville

Editor’s note: The writer is business manager for Local 1049 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

I’m not superior, just trying to stay alive

In her op-ed “Partisan COVID divide hurts us all” [Opinion, May 5], Cathy Young asks, “Should liberals curb the COVID virtue signaling?” This refers to wearing masks even after being fully vaccinated.

I am fully vaccinated and still wear my mask in crowded

places. It has never crossed my mind to signal virtue. I wear it because COVID-19 is still here, scientists are still learning about it, and I am an older person, with medical issues, who wants to stay alive and keep others alive with me.

Why should anyone assume, when they see me, that I am trying to show off some moral superiority? I am making the best decision I can, with questions about the variants’ strengths still unanswerable.

I feel safer being vaccinated but not totally safe since there is no herd immunity. I no longer wear a mask around my family, but I will on a crowded Manhattan sidewalk. Instead of thinking I’m trying to make a point, can’t people take the moment to think that I, and many like me who have underlying, but invisible, medical conditions, may have a good reason to protect ourselves?

Let’s stop using the phrase “virtue signaling” and compassionately wish each other good health.

Roberta Comerchero, Commack

Kudos for including excluded workers

I greatly appreciated the editorial “Honoring our pandemic heroes” [April 30] and agree with the opening: “We’re still counting the many ways New York’s essential workers sacrificed and suffered through the pandemic.” So I, too, support your editorial board’s call for “more than symbolic thank-you for their service.”

This is why I applaud New York State’s inclusion of the Excluded Workers Fund in the 2021 budget that will provide financial help for undocumented immigrant workers excluded for more than a year from federal and state pandemic relief.

Our economy was inevitably hit hard by the global pandemic, but these people are largely

responsible for helping us keep our heads above water. But even more significant, they risked their lives — and many of them and their families lost their lives — working jobs that made it possible for the rest of us to have our elderly and sick cared for, safely obtain food and essential services, and much more.

These home health aides, restaurant, grocery, maintenance and other essential workers who have lost income during the pandemic have earned both our thanks and help paying their bills. The Excluded Workers Fund is the least that we can do.

The Right Rev.

Lawrence C. Provenzano, Garden City

Editor’s note: The writer is bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island.

EMAIL A LETTER OF UP TO 200 words to letters@newsday.com. Letters become the property of Newsday and are edited for all media.

DANIEL BRENNAN