

NASSAU-SUFFOLK SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

**Invited Testimony
Presented by**

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NEW YORK STATE SENATE DEMOCRATS

Public Forum

**“Budget Issues in Health, Education, Higher Education
and Social Services”**

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On behalf of its 113 Long Island member boards of education, Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association welcomes the New York State Senate Democrat delegation to Long Island, not the land of wealth and spending that is popularly portrayed, but the land of hard-working citizenry that have long understood the value of education and the role high quality public schools play in the economic vitality of this region. Long Island's public school systems have been sustained largely by local property taxpayers who have, year after year, voted to tax themselves in a proportion that far exceeds the rest of the state.

It is not late-breaking news to our boards of education that their local taxpayers have reached the breaking point and can no longer be expected to sustain the responsibility of making up for shortfalls in state and federal education funding. Contrary to common belief, for the past fifteen years increases in Long Island school budgets have gone primarily to bring our school systems back from the devastation caused by the Cuomo-era cuts to education. It has only been in the last two years that more than a handful of Long Island districts have recovered the percentage of state aid in their operating budgets that they had received in 1989-90!

Through the difficult time of the last state financial crisis in the early and mid 90's, it was Long Island state income taxes, sales taxes, state fees and lottery monies that were repeatedly tapped to restore the state to fiscal soundness, while at the same time state aid cutbacks were forcing our local property taxes to skyrocket.

It is understandable, therefore, that our boards have great concern that the 90's scenario may repeat itself.

If the Senate Democrats leave here today with little else, let it be an understanding of the key role Long Island and its schools would play in moving the state toward economic recovery. It is widely acknowledged our well-regarded public school systems remain foremost in what attracts families and businesses to Long Island. It is Long Island families and businesses that sustain its economy and, in turn, that of the State of New York. It is Long Island that provides the highly educated workforce on which New York City's economy relies.

Should the perception that our school systems are being decimated take hold, families and businesses will relocate and the ramifications to the state are quite clear. Without fuel, your economic engine will grind to a halt.

Board members recognize the dire fiscal crisis facing New York State. They are all too familiar with the pressures you will face in balancing required services with diminished resources. However, you share with them the Constitutional responsibility of protecting the fiscal and educational integrity of New York's public schools.

Our Association has been invited here today to provide its input on a number of emerging issues that will likely garner attention in state budget negotiations.

>Even in its first year of implementation, Foundation Aid ill-served the vast majority of Long Island school districts, relegating them to a "save harmless" status that usually kicks in during the waning years of a deteriorating state aid formula. Were it not for the

Senate's success in securing an additional High Tax Aid, modest budget increases would have resulted in unreasonable property tax hikes. This flawed formula does not recognize the extraordinary property tax burden carried by Long Island taxpayers, is based on a distorted view of Long Island's income wealth and does not adequately recognize the high cost of doing business on Long Island. The Foundation Aid Formula must be adjusted to take into account a true recognition of regional cost and wealth.

>True and immediate mandate relief must be provided to schools in order to enable them to better manage revenue shortfalls. It is not enough to pledge that the State will go "cold turkey" and send on no new unfunded mandates. It must sunset all existing mandates and reinstate only those that are deemed essential and worthy of accompanying state aid. Priority should be focused on those mandates whose elimination will produce immediate cost reductions....everything from repeal of the Wicks Law to rescinding paid leave for breast and prostate screening.

>The escalating and seemingly out-of-control costs of delivering special education services are gaining much welcomed attention. For decades Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association, New York State School Boards Association and National School Boards Association have sought the State's partnership in advocating for Congress to fulfill its commitment to fully fund its Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In Y08, New York received just 17.2% in I.D.E.A. funding in lieu of the long-promised 40% it is due. This is no small matter. It amounts to a shortfall of more than \$956 million, nearly half the amount you are seeking to cut in January! We are calling upon the Governor, in his negotiations for stimulus funds from Washington to put payment of this outstanding debt on the table.

>Collaboration on sharing services amongst school districts and other levels of government has been a particular focus of our Association for many years. It is noteworthy that we and the County Executives of Nassau and Suffolk have moved forward on a number of cost-saving initiatives. Progress into exploring areas where the greatest savings could be generated has been hampered however, by our inability to secure State Shared Services Efficiency Grants. We ask for your support of our applications for Shared Services grants. In addition, legislation must be forthcoming in the 2009 session that will enable BOCES to fulfill a greater role of providing cost savings through cooperation, in areas such as auditing, pooling of insurance, purchasing, etc.

>Public schools are being warned that they must share the pain of aid cutbacks while charter schools would remain protected from budget worries. Communities should cease to be responsible for sending their tax dollars to state-imposed charter schools. If the state wishes to continue to support the private corporations running charter schools, the state should absorb all costs.

>Our Association continues its advocacy for Incentive Aid to assist school districts in exploring the feasibility of school district consolidation and Transition Aid to address the added costs incurred in the initial years of consolidation. The ultimate decision on whether to merge should rest in the hands of the voters in the school districts affected. The Legislature must resist efforts to wrest control from local taxpayers and maintain the requirement of a local referendum for the merger of school districts.

>State Legislators have by now been provided with sufficient data and information that contradict the simplistic notion that local taxes would diminish and education would not suffer under a state-imposed school property tax cap. The public relations benefits for jumping aboard and championing the ill-vetted, but populist school property tax cap campaign must by now have played themselves out. It is time that the Legislature and Governor take off the table this politically motivated distraction to the real work required to deal with the state and local budget crises. A property tax cap is already in place and it is in the hands of those who will live with the consequences of an approval or disapproval of a proposed school budget...the voters. It would be the height of arrogance and irresponsibility for the state to renege on its school funding commitments, while at the same time rendering the local taxpayer powerless to protect its community's investment in its schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to bring to your attention some of the concerns voiced by our boards of education. Without a true understanding of the needs of schools and plight of taxpayers across the state you, our state representatives, will be ill prepared to ensure that cutbacks in the state's funding commitments are not translated into higher local property taxes. It is a daunting task you are about to undertake. The Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association pledges its help in providing any assistance you may require in assessing the short and long term ramifications of any state aid proposals that are advanced.