

NW School District urges parents: 'Reach out to your legislators' as lack of aid threatens programs/pre-K

BY MICHAEL DEPIETRO

Interim Tribune Editor

As school districts across New York state grapple with their reopening plans, another pandemic-related issue threatens to disrupt the education of thousands of students.

The issue? Money – or, more accurately, a lack thereof – as New York state continues to reduce aid (roughly 20%) for school districts as it deals with the pandemic's financial repercussions. State officials have, thus far, indicated the holds are temporary and will be released once an aid deal is reached and the state begins seeing payments from the federal government. Lawmakers in the State Senate met Monday to urge Congress to move quickly and negotiate the latest COVID-19 stimulus package.

The issue was front and center last week during the Niagara Wheatfield Board of Education's annual reorganization meeting. The NWCS D is seeing the 20% reduction in its expensed-based-aid lines for funds they were supposed to receive back from the 2019-20 school year.

Assistant Superintendent of Finance and Management Allison Davis was on hand to break down some of the figures. Currently, the state has only withheld what is owed for the 2019-20 year. That figure is \$729,000, and climbing in aid tied to last year's expenses for programs like pre-K, summer school aid and BOCES aid, as well as other excess costs. The district will now have to cover those expenses with its 2019-20 general fund.

At this point, the district is chalking those owed payments up as a loss. Davis said that, because repayments have not been promised by the state, the district's auditors won't even book the back payments as a receivable for the 2019-20 budget.

"It's like it's gone. ... If we end up getting it and it's repaid, it'll be like a windfall in the year it comes in, but I, right now, don't expect that money to come in," Davis said.

Looking ahead, Davis said it's uncertain if the state will be withholding any funding for the year 2020-21 and she wouldn't be able to tell until state aid payments for the 2020-21 school year begin to arrive. However, if the hold does continue, the financial losses could be catastrophic. Davis said a 20% reduction in state aid for the 2020-21 school year would mean losing approximately \$6.8 million.

"I will say, that's going to be difficult to try to manage in this current school year if that happens," Davis said.

She added, "I just wanted to give you an idea of what kind of money we're talking about here. It's quite a bit and we do not have the cash to support that right now."

The fallout from the withheld aid is already impacting the district's pre-K programs, which is entirely funded by state grants. If a funding solution is not found, the program could be shut down after the fall term, halfway through the year.

Niagara Wheatfield School Superintendent Daniel Ljiljanich explained it had previously been

assumed a 20% reduction in pre-K funding would mean the district could simply lower the amount of students it could accept into the program, and the funding would balance out with the district paying nothing (as it currently does). Based on that assumption, the district filled 112 of its 141 slots available for pre-K students.

However, in a conversation earlier last week with state education officials, it was clarified that the district would be responsible for 20% of the overall pre-K costs, regardless of enrollment. Davis elaborated on the figures noting that, in addition to the \$136,578.80 the district is still owed for from the 2019-20 school year, the figure would now be on the hook for an additional \$131,891 this year.

The board agreed that it wouldn't be right to abandon the program just two weeks before the school year starts, as it would leave hundreds of families scrambling for child care.

Instead, as indicated in a letter sent out this week, the district will fund the program through Jan. 29, 2021, midway through the school year. A notice will be sent out to parents in 10 weeks indicating whether or not the program will continue through June 2021. Ljiljanich said, ultimately, that decision would come down to whether the district is receiving funding from the state or not.

"That is the frustration. We know how important that is for our kids. We worked really hard to get that program in place for our kids. And now, I'll just call it a lack of action, puts us in a place where we have to make a decision

not knowing about the funding," Ljiljanich said.

In light of the discussions, Ljiljanich gave an urgent plea to concerned parents and citizens to reach out to state representatives and make their voices heard.

"Here's what I would say to everyone in New York state involved with public education: Reach out to your legislators. We need them. We need them to act. We need them to, in my opinion, come back in session to act on legislation to get funding to states during this crisis," Ljiljanich said.

The call was echoed by board member Robert McDermott, who expressed worry about potential cuts.

"Everybody should understand, this is really a big impact on the school district with the dollars that we're losing," he said. "Really, reach out to your senators and voice your opinion. I mean, at this time, we really need more voices heard, because the impact it's going to have on the school is not good. ... We already took a reduction from the state in the beginning of this year. It's compounding right now. It's not very good, business-wise, the direction we're going, and I'd hate to see anything cut. So we really need voices heard."

The urgency for area residents to speak out was also reinforced by School Board President Steven Sabo, who made the important point that school districts who take in less state aid would be less likely to speak up about the issue.

"We talked about the discrepancy between downstate versus

up here; you have (Niagara Falls City School District), which is about 90% state funded, and then you have some districts like Westchester County that's about 4%. If you take back 20% of their 4% it's like, 'OK, big deal.' They're not calling anyone to complain. All of us that are 50% or greater, it's getting challenging now," Sabo said. "Please, to the constituents out there, talk to your (elected officials) if you can."

The recent letter from the school board includes the contact information for local and state lawmakers. New York State Sen. Robert Ortz can be reached at 434-0608. Contact information for Sens. Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand can be found at www.schumer.senate.gov/contact/email-me and www.gillibrand.senate.gov/contact/email-me.

The district did get some potential good news this week in terms of state-owed funds, however. The district is currently in year three of a five-year deal with the state where it would receive reimbursements of \$4 million per year relating to repairs and renovations the district had done at Tuscarora Indian Elementary. So far, the district has not received any payments from the state.

However, Ljiljanich said that, on Monday, the district received the final signed contracts, signed off on by the New York state comptroller's office. He said the district is now just awaiting payment from the New York State Education Department.

'In the Loop' with the Lewiston-Porter Board of Education

Lewiston-Porter's first week set for Sept. 8-11

BY JODEE RIORDAN

Board of Education President

Lewiston-Porter is ready to begin the 2020-21 school year. As you know, we have students returning in both 100% remotely and in a hybrid model, where they will be on campus two days a week and virtual the other three. As of right now, we have over 300 students in the 100% remote model. Students returning in-person are assigned to two teams: green team (last names A-L) and white team (last names M-Z).

The first week of school (Sept. 8-11) will be a time of orientation. There is so much for both students and staff to get accustomed to; orientation week will allow everyone to ease into the new year.

Teachers will be meeting with Lew-Port's green group students and white group students in the hybrid model, establishing procedures and protocols and teacher/liaisons will be bringing the district's 100% remote learners up to speed over the course of those first four days.

The first day of school for students on the green team is Tuesday, Sept. 8: this will be a day of in-person learning. The first day for students on the white team is Thursday, Sept. 10: this will also be a day of in-person learning. Pre-K and kindergarten meet and greets will be set by appointment. Monday, Sept. 14, will be the first full day of graded instruction for

the 2020-21 school year.

During this final week of summer, welcome packets, student schedules and classroom placement letters will be sent, along with bus schedules. We thank our families for your patience, as this has been very difficult work.

As Superintendent Paul Caseri said in this week's message: "The work to create reopening procedures is incredibly detailed and intricate. I hope families will recognize this and be patient in terms of notification on student schedules and bus assignments. We have, to date, over 300 students that are moving to a 100% remote learning model. Each time we add new students to the 100% remote model, student lists change in terms of classroom scheduling and bus schedules. We are working through these changes and will have hybrid student schedules and 100% remote student schedules out by next

Tuesday, Sept. 1.

"We have had to create a teacher staffing model for the 100% remote model and, as that develops, we have had to pull teachers out of the regular schedule and take those hybrid/in-person students assigned to those teachers and reintegrate them into other classes. This is tedious and detailed work, but it is coming together. We recognize that families need to understand their children's schedule in both models and we are working toward that end."

Lewiston-Porter's 100% remote students will receive their family handbook/user guide, schedules and teacher/liaison assignments by next Tuesday. The district will be offering parent virtual forums at both the elementary and secondary levels for parents to ask questions of principals regarding this model, as well as to meet staff and help better understand the requirements of the virtual model.

We will be finalizing the dates and times of the parent virtual forums this Friday and that information will be included in the 100% remote model learning packet.

Technology distribution days for 100% virtual learners will take place by building, next Wednesday, Sept. 2 (10 a.m.-3 p.m.), Thursday Sept. 3 (2-6 p.m.) and Friday Sept. 4 (10 a.m.-2 p.m.). The 100% remote families should plan on coming to their children's building during these times to pick up the technology (iPad/Chromebook) necessary to implement 100% remote learning. Please direct any questions regarding this technology pick-up to the building's main offices

(PEC: 286-7220; IEC: 286-7252; MS: 286-7201; and HS: 286-7263).

Lewiston-Porter requests parents spend this week preparing students for mask-wearing. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of preparing students returning to campus to practice mask-wearing in a consistent way. Each building will be offering designated mask breaks during the entire school day, but it will be a significant adjustment for students to wear masks more often and at greater intervals, than they are currently.

Masks are required by all students and staff at all times except during designated break times. We

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