

Cuomo's proposed budget draws criticism from Niagara Wheatfield CSD

BY MICHAEL DEPIETRO

Last month, Gov. Andrew Cuomo unveiled his proposed 2021-22 executive budget for New York. His education spending plans have sparked concerns amongst local school districts that they could miss out on millions of dollars in much-needed aid.

During last week's Niagara Wheatfield School Board meeting, Superintendent of Schools Daniel G. Ljiljanich highlighted how some of the proposed measures could negatively impact the district. His concerns were a recap of some of the discussions that occurred during the most recent Niagara Orleans School Board Association presentation, where superintendents from the group aired similar concerns to local legislators.

Among the more troubling issues in Cuomo's budget, it was pointed out, are plans to supplant normal state education funds with federal COVID-19 relief funds. Federal funds were intended to fill the funding gap caused by the pandemic during the 2019-20 fiscal year, where many districts across the state saw cuts to aid

totaling around 20%. Instead, the state is using those funds as a cost-saving measure to reduce its own education spending this year by more than \$607 million.

Ljiljanich said the fees for re-opening last fall cost the district roughly \$1.63 million in funds it did not have budgeted. The district is also still seeking reimbursements from the state for its nutritional program, which was ramped up during the pandemic at the state's request.

"We were asked to make sure that we would fund (the nutritional program). What some people don't understand is that they've withheld some of that money that was supposed to be paid to us in the form of reimbursements for the money that we spent on food from last school year. We're saying to the state: 'You asked us to provide this, you need to reimburse us,'" Ljiljanich said.

Although the state has indicated grants the district received for the current school year will be fully funded by the end of this year, Ljiljanich said there isn't any indication the district will see any of the direct funding that was

withheld last year.

Other pressing issues for school districts are Cuomo's plans to consolidate expense-based aid lines, something he pushed for last year but was unable to get. These line items include aid for BOCES, high tax aid, special services, hardware and technology, charter school transitional, software, library, textbook, supplemental public excess cost and academic enhancement. Such a move could potentially reduce state spending by \$393 million in 2021-22. However, school officials believe the ramifications would wreak havoc.

"What he's done is compressed all of the different amounts into one category and you'll just get a 2% increase on that. So it has nothing to do with what your expenses really are," Ljiljanich said.

He then floated an example using the district's purchasing of school busses as a way this consolidation would be detrimental.

"If you just think about a \$100,000 bus; when we purchased that bus, we (currently) get about \$70,000 back on that bus (over 15 years). ... If (Cuomo) does it this way, and you get a 2% increase

on your transportation spending, just take that \$100,000, and now you're getting 2% ... \$2,000 versus \$70,000. Buses are not an option for districts who have to provide transportation to our kids," Ljiljanich said.

Assistant Superintendent of Finance and Management Allison Davis addressed the problem succinctly. He said, "It would be impossible for some districts to be able to manage a budget because with the tax cap limitations, we can't just tax the public for those losses and we wouldn't have the reserves make up for it."

Ljiljanich said the only good news so far is that feedback received during the legislative update meeting indicates legislators will try to ensure the consolidation is a "non-starter."

The meeting presentation also included a spotlight on several services and needs that local districts are hoping legislators can secure reliably consistent funding for. Among these needs is long-term investments in technology accessibility, which Ljiljanich said has become "glaring" amid

the pandemic.

"There are students who have very little access to technology, maybe zero access to a Wi-Fi connection, which puts them at a serious disadvantage when it comes to their counterparts in the academic world. We're asking the state to invest long-term in both technology and Wi-Fi access for our school communities," he said.

Other needs mentioned include long-term investments in school-based health and mental health services, statewide requirements for Universal Pre-K and kindergarten mandatory, and flexible pathways to graduation, among others.

"I think everyone can clearly see what the expectations are, and what the needs are for our communities. And what we're asking from our legislators is to make sure that the monies are there and available for districts to provide what our communities expect us to provide," Ljiljanich said.

Elsewhere, he added, "We're happy to take that on all of these challenges. But we need to make sure that the finances are there."

'In the Loop' with the Lew-Port Board of Education: NCDOH revises COVID quarantine guidelines

BY JODEE RIORDAN

Board of Education President

Happy Valentine's Day! We hope this bitter-cold weekend finds you cozied up with those you love.

A reminder: This is a long weekend for Lewiston-Porter's students and staff. The district will be closed Monday and Tuesday for the extended Presidents' Day holiday. Classes will resume virtually for all hybrid students on Wednesday, with a remote Monday schedule. Thursday will see the green group on campus/white group virtual. Friday has the white group on campus/green group virtual.

Lew-Port's 100% remote learners will have Monday and Tuesday off and follow their normal schedule Wednesday-Friday.

• Education at Lewiston-Porter continues in the two models (hybrid and remote). Although we continue to see cases throughout the community, with the current safety pro-

ocols in place in Lew-Port schools (state-mandated social distancing, mask-wearing, cleaning/sanitizing procedures), there has been no evidence to date of any spread. The statewide data continues to point to the fact that there is little to no COVID-19 spread as evidenced from required school quarantines, and that is consistent with Lew-Port's monitoring of positive cases. This has led to an important change in guidelines by the Niagara County Department of Health.

NCDOH announced it would no longer quarantine individuals solely on the basis of "proximal contact." Proximal contact was defined by NCDOH as being in the same room for at least 60 minutes (cumulative) over the course of a school day with an individual who has tested positive for COVID-19. Community contact will still require quarantine and, in some instances, there might be a

quarantine that develops in school. Those decisions would be made on a case-by-case basis.

This change in protocol mirrors the current procedures that have been in place for Erie County schools since late November.

Please continue to follow Superintendent Paul Casseri's updates and visit the L-P website (www.lew-port.com) often for current information, as things continue to change frequently.

• Winter sports are off to a good start, with basketball, bowling, hockey and swimming all underway. Athletic Director Brad Halgash reports most events will be available via live streaming through the Lew-Port YouTube link. Full information on how to view these contests is posted on the L-P athletics site each day and also tweeted out through various school pages. As there are no spectators allowed this season, this will

give Lew-Port parents and community a chance to see their Lancers in action. Tune in and catch the excitement.

• Organizers of the Lewiston-Porter Alumni Association Veterans' Memorial report \$6,030 has been raised to date toward this memorial. The fundraising campaign recognizes the service and sacrifice of graduates who have served in the U.S. armed forces.

Donations thus far have exceeded the original goal, and Ed Engel, LPAA vice president and Class of 1958 member, reports planning is now underway.

"First, I want to thank all the alumni that donated to the memorial. Everyone was so generous with their donations," he said. "Now starts the details and planning - the concrete sidewalk, the landscaping, ordering the bench (and) upgrading the birch tree to a red maple. I am sure there will

be more. The alumni veterans will appreciate the recognition and the students will appreciate the veterans."

The memorial is expected to feature a bench set dedicated to the honor and sacrifice of all L-P alumni who served our country in war and peace. The seat will be engraved with the words "Freedom is Not Free." Dedication of the memorial is now targeted for fall, prior to Veterans Day 2021.

To make a donation toward the memorial, visit the Lew-Port Alumni Veterans GoFundMe page (<https://www.gofundme.com/f/lewiston-porter-veterans-memorial>). Donations may also be sent to Lewiston-Porter Alumni Association: Memorial Fund, 4061 Creek Road, Youngstown, NY 14174.

Visit the Alumni Facebook page or contact Alumni Association President Bruce Newton or VP Ed Engel for more information.

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Scholarship opportunity

agora Wheatfield, Starpoint and Wilson school districts. Applications are available through the

guidance offices. Eligible students must be entering college in the fall.

Applications are due March 8. Interviews will be scheduled via Zoom the evening of March 31.

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