

GUEST VIEWPOINT

Tax cap would cripple N.Y.'s school districts

By Richard C. Iannuzzi

Teachers are taxpayers, too. They bear the same property tax burden as other middle-class homeowners. It's hardly surprising that the vast majority of New Yorkers, stressed by budget deficits and a bad economy, favor capping local property taxes.

Yet, year after year, the same opinion polls also show New Yorkers strongly oppose cutting education funding. They still want to protect their prized local schools and perhaps do not fully appreciate the devastating impact an ill-conceived tax cap plan would have on education.

Certainly, the misguided members of the state Senate who voted last week for a devastating tax cap don't understand what working New Yorkers really want and need. Homeowners want real relief, while maintaining sound educational programs. What they got from the Senate was a lot of bravado, but no real relief and the potential to dismantle the excellent educational opportunities that support the property values coveted by homeowners.

A new study by the New York State School Boards Association paints an ugly picture. It finds that if the Legislature were to adopt this poorly thought-out tax cap, schools would lose at least \$3.3 billion in local funding between now and the end of 2013-14 school year.

This loss of local school revenue would be on top of the \$1.86 billion in state funding cuts that districts have suffered since 2008-09. This precipitous drop in state support, mitigated to some degree by federal stimulus dollars, has forced school districts to slash nearly 15,000 K-12 education jobs, increase class sizes and eliminate essential programs.

As the tax cap debate escalates, it's fair to ask: How is New York going to attract new jobs and new business — and ensure bright futures for its young people — if a tax cap plan severely hampers the ability of school districts and community colleges to create the trained work force needed to support a revitalized state economy?

Tax caps are troubling on many levels. To begin with, they provide only the illusion of relief. Even more problematic is that tax caps undermine local autonomy and democracy by imposing arbitrary spending limits set by politicians in Albany, regardless of community priorities.

School boards have been responsive to community concerns and careful stewards of the public's money. Last year, for example, school boards increased spending by an average of just 1.1 percent, and tax levies — despite deep cuts in state aid — rose just 2.9 percent. Voters signaled they understood that schools had done their best to rein in costs while preserving quality education, and they passed a near-record 92.4 percent of school budgets on the first try.

Unfortunately, too much of what happens is beyond the control of local school boards. Costs for health insurance, electricity and fuel for school buses rise and fall without regard to whether Albany has set an artificial ceiling on what schools can spend.

A number of ideas have already been floated and many are still striving to find a solution that works for taxpayers and schools. It's a difficult balancing act. New York State United Teachers will be working with other state leaders on how to meet the economic needs of this state. However, we must be careful not to silence the voices of parents and others who want to maintain excellent public schools and we must protect education from the harm an irresponsible tax cap would cause.

Iannuzzi is president of the 600,000-member New York State United Teachers.

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Science fairs foster love of learning in students

Regional contest continues important lessons

By Mary Eileen Wood

Last month in his State of the Union address, President Barack Obama applauded science fairs:

"Maintaining our leadership in research and technology is crucial to America's success. But if we want to win the future — if we want innovation to produce jobs in America and not overseas — then we also have to win the race to educate our kids. ... We need to teach our kids that it's not just the winner of the Super Bowl who deserves to be celebrated, but the winner of the science fair."

GUEST VIEWPOINT

Every middle and high school student, every family and community around Elmira has a great regional science fair at which to celebrate a love of science or engineering — and our youth will need those skills to win the future.

The Dr. Nelson Ying Tri Region Science and Engineering Fair (www.YingTRSEF.org) in Syracuse gives students from 24 counties reasons to explore the world and seek mentors to guide them. We offer days of fun, and we gather judges and awards for encouragement. Caring adults applaud. Every skilled trade union and tech company can send judges and awards for Fair Day. The entire community helps these youth win the future.

Certainly, Corning Inc. brings the Chemung-Stauben communities into the Ying TRSEF family. As corporate sponsor of the fair's Chemistry Category, the company is essential to the success of the entire science fest. Chemung Valley Montessori School Head George Conway said they are again preparing to send its contingent to Syracuse.

"Our students do more than bring their projects to Syracuse to compete for great awards," he said. "They thoroughly enjoy the opportunity to interact with so many inspiring scientists and engineers, and can't wait to meet this year's featured guest, Nobel laureate Roald Hoffman!"

Why are science fairs so important for kids? Each project gives meaning to what they learn in school, gives purpose to the tools their teachers provide and gives reality to the need to learn. The students of today will forge the future; they need to be prepared. Science fair experience empowers them to win the future.

Over the past 16 years, I have seen thousands of children and teens celebrate Fair Day and talk knowledgeably about such a range of topics, it takes my breath away. Whether they're 11-year-olds or soon-to-graduate seniors, these rising experts give me an abiding hope for the future.

What do they have in common? People like you! People who make sure kids get to the library for the book about ... well, about whatever fascinates them. People who drive them to each



Photo provided

Chemung County Science Champion Katherine Porter of Chemung Valley Montessori School competed in the Dr. Nelson Ying Tri Region Science and Engineering Fair last year.

Wood is director of the Dr. Nelson Ying Tri Region Science and Engineering Fair.

Wait a minute — let me take that back. It is brain science. It is each student taking the brain he or she was born with and using it to ask questions and go find the answers. Combine that brain with the important tools provided in classrooms every day, and youth can do the real-world work of exploring and learning and preparing for apprenticeships, college and careers.

Kids have the brains. You've got the science fair. So, let's win the future!

Wood is director of the Dr. Nelson Ying Tri Region Science and Engineering Fair.

TODAY IN HISTORY

This is Sunday, Feb. 6, 2011. On this date:

► In 1778, the United States won official recognition from France with the signing of a Treaty of Alliance in Paris.

► In 1788, Massachusetts became the sixth state to ratify the U.S. Constitution.

► In 1899, a peace treaty between the United States and Spain was ratified by the U.S. Senate.

► In 1911, Ronald Wilson Reagan, the 40th president of the United States, was born in Tampico, Ill.

► In 1933, the 20th Amendment to the Constitution, the so-called "lame duck" amendment, was proclaimed in effect by Secretary of State Henry Stimson.

► In 1952, Britain's King George VI died; he was suc-

ceeded by his daughter, Elizabeth II.

► In 1959, the United States successfully test-fired for the first time a Titan intercontinental ballistic missile from Cape Canaveral.

► In 1978, Muriel Humphrey took the oath of office as a United States senator from Minnesota, filling the seat of her late husband, former Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

► In 1991, comedian and television performer Danny Thomas died in Los Angeles at age 79.

► In 1992, 16 people were killed when a C-130 military transport plane crashed in Evansville, Ind.

► In 1996, a Turkish-owned Boeing 757 jetliner crashed into the Atlantic Ocean shortly after

takeoff from the Dominican Republic, killing 189 people, mostly German tourists.

► In 2001, Ariel Sharon was elected Israeli prime minister in a landslide win over Ehud Barak.

► In 2006, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales defended the Bush administration's eavesdropping program before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Also, terrorist conspirator Zacarias Moussaoui disrupted the opening of his sentencing trial in Alexandria, Va., and was tossed out of court.

► In 2010, former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, delivering the keynote address at the first national Tea Party convention in Nashville, Tenn., declared, "America is ready for another revolution."

Winter goes faster when you celebrate the small stuff

Tragedy marks first few weeks of new year

Some weeks, you just need something to celebrate. This was one of those weeks.

I grew up in a family that liked to celebrate all types of holidays. We exchanged gifts for Valentine's Day and went out to dinner on Sweetest Day. Card companies (and the U.S. Postal Service) still love us.

This past week I happily ordered noodles for long life and dumplings for luck on Beijing Garden in Elmira. It was Chinese New Year, after all — the Year of the Rabbit. My husband, who has learned to go along with all of the celebrating, noted the high number of rabbit tracks in the yard Thursday after our big snow event (or non-event, depending on your point of view).

Today, I know my family will make a celebration out of the Super Bowl in their Ohio home. My sister will root for her beloved Steelers; she has loved them since we were kids, probably because I was a Browns fan. They will have special food and watch the game together and it will be an event.

I will watch as well, but in my home here — and when the game action slows, I will address Valentine's Day cards to co-workers, relatives and friends, near and far.

It's the little things that get us all through winter, and it's been such a rough winter in terms of frigid cold and a run of sad news, especially locally, with the deaths of 15-month-old Benjamin Reed in a home explosion in Horseheads and 14-year-old Chance Simoons, a Southside High School freshman, who was killed as he crossed Clemens Center Parkway.

National and international news has been equally disturbing and heartbreaking, from the shooting of Rep. Gabby Giffords in Arizona to the absolutely horrifying images of protesters being mowed down by speeding government vehicles in Egypt as turmoil there continues.

We've already had a year's worth of sadness and mind-numbing violence in a just a few short weeks of 2011; every day in January seemed to come with a new tragedy. But each of us finds a way to cope or escape, be it visiting with friends on Facebook or gathering in groups to watch today's big game.

January is now behind us and February, thankfully, is the shortest month. If Punxsutawney Phil — even groundhogs are celebrated — is to be believed, then spring is creeping up on us.

Having something to celebrate, be it lunar new year, groundhogs, presidents, white sales or football teams, will get us all through the cabin fever that comes with a Northeast winter.

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OPINION POLL

Do you believe the next state budget will make enough cuts to alleviate New York's debt problems?

Yes: 26.2% | No: 73.8%
Total votes: 309

Go to the Viewpoints section at stargazette.com and cast your vote.



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Editor's Corner