

Why school costs rose as enrollment dropped

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Public school enrollment in New York State is down, dropping at least 5% in most districts since 2007-08. But spending is up. Why?

The Office of the State Comptroller answers that question in a new report that is sympathetic to the pressures on school boards and school administrators.

"School districts must navigate a complex set of state rules and local needs to determine how to best educate our children and pay for it," Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli said in a news release. "My office's report identifies the regional changes and trends that could impact district budgets now and in the future."

The report notes that schools are serving rising numbers of special education students and English language learners.

A quarter-million students outside of New York City were classified as having a disability in 2017-18. To educate them, districts spent an average of \$20,820 more than what they spend on general education students, according to the report. State and federal programs fund about 57% of such costs, and local districts pay for the remaining 43%.

The percentage of students classified as having a disability has increased, according to the report. Outside New York City, the figure has risen from 12.5% in 2012-13 to 13.6% in 2017-18.

Also, nearly a fifth of disabled students remain enrolled in school beyond four years of high school. The statewide four-year graduation rate excluding New York City is 64% for students with disabilities, compared with about 90% for general education students.

The number of English language learners - another population that requires special attention by educators - has increased 54.4% since 2007-08.

Overall, though, enrollment is trending down. In the last decade, most districts' enrollment declined by at least 5%, and 145 districts experienced declines of more than 20%, according to the report.

A major theme of the report is that the state is not a monolith; economic and demographic conditions that impact education vary widely in different regions of the state. Some regional differences included:

- The Mohawk Valley had the highest concentration of students living in poverty (nearly 19%) and Long Island had the lowest (less than 8%). The state average excluding New York City was 14% in 2017-18.
- The North Country districts had the highest percentage of students with a disability (15.7%) while the Mid-Hudson region had the lowest at 12.6%. The state average excluding New York City was 13.6% in 2017-18.
- Long Island had the highest percentage of English language learners (9.2%) and the North Country had the lowest (0.5%). The state average excluding New York City was 5.9% in 2017-18.

Some regional differences are deceptive. While Long Island had the highest per-pupil expenditure in 2017-18 (\$28,883), the island's level of spending is the second lowest among the state's regions when adjusted by the regional cost index (\$19,411).

To read the report, go to bit.ly/2QXEYO  **11.8MB**.

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