

BOCES Aid Key to Students' Future

By JAMES N. BALDWIN

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Last year, Gov. Eliot Spitzer and the state Legislature made an unprecedented commitment to funding public education through enactment of the foundation aid formula and expansion of BOCES aid. Together, these provided an additional \$1.7 billion in state aid to school districts.

What is perplexing about this year's executive budget request is the proposed reduction in anticipated BOCES aid of \$661.9 million.

This reduction will discourage the intermunicipal cooperation that the governor wishes to promote and will cost local taxpayers some \$68 million.

Governor Spitzer argues that the aid reduction will fall mostly on "wealthy" districts, and is, therefore, consistent with the general thrust of state policy to direct funds to the most needy school districts.

While districts with greater capacity to pay may be the targets, the reduction will have devastating effects on many districts that rely on the participation of larger, more prosperous ones to make BOCES' cooperative programs available and affordable. And it will diminish equity of opportunity across New York.

BOCES aid allows districts to achieve economy and efficiency in the delivery of educational programs and administrative and managerial services.

The result is that districts come together to provide a wider range of choices to students and their parents. Locally, BOCES career and technical education, alternative education, New Visions career exploration and Tech Valley High School are programs for which districts receive BOCES aid.

While many think the school choice movement started with charter schools, BOCES have been, and remain, the vehicle through which districts offer a wider range of educational choices -- and equity of opportunity -- to students and their parents.

BOCES also provide "back-office" services to districts, including central business office services at significantly reduced costs to local taxpayers. BOCES internal audit services save participating districts up to 50 percent of fees they would otherwise pay. A recent service developed by Questar III that supports school district compliance with government accounting standards is saving participating districts and their taxpayers thousands of dollars. BOCES also provide professional development and training services to teachers and school leaders.

The reduction of BOCES aid will be a disincentive to districts' participating in cooperative services and make such services far more costly for the smaller, poorer school districts that rely on them. It will inevitably lead to duplication and redundancy of services and programs from district to district. This flies in the face of the governor's worthy objective to hold the line on growth of the property tax burden and achieve greater economy and efficiency in the delivery of government services overall.

The recent report of the Governor's Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness calls for state incentives and changes in law for local governments to achieve greater efficiency through expanded intergovernmental cooperation and to consolidate various government functions. This is what we at BOCES do -- and what we have a decades-long record of doing well.

On behalf of the region's 48 school districts, I applaud the governor and the Legislature for their historic commitment to public education. However, I urge them to fully restore BOCES aid at a time when local property taxpayers need relief -- and school districts need to further expand their capacity to deliver a wide range of high-quality educational choices to students and their parents. N. Baldwin is the district superintendent of Questar III BOCES and interim district superintendent of Capital Region BOCES.