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Pauline Liu: Hopeful new developments on the education front

Parents and teachers who've been battling over aid for high-poverty schools and high-stakes testing may be happy to learn about three recent developments on the education front.

To me, each represents a shift in attitude. They show that we're making progress.

One of the biggest announcements occurred the other day. A bill called the Small City Successful School Act is gaining momentum.

More than 200 administrators and school board members have sent letters to Gov. Andrew Cuomo urging its passage.

If it were to become law, it would provide more than \$96 million in additional state aid to small city schools in poor districts such as Kingston, Middletown, Monticello, Newburgh and Port Jervis.

With a total of more than 50 small city school districts, the money might not go as far as the bill's sponsors would like, but it is aimed at funding new programs including drop-out prevention, class size reduction and extended learning time.

According to lawmakers, collectively, the small city school districts were denied \$537 million under the Gap Elimination Adjustment and frozen Foundation aid over the past year.

Meanwhile in New Paltz, there are two developments that have education advocates across the region abuzz.

First, there's the position statement adopted by the New Paltz Board of Education earlier this month, which blasts the new teacher evaluation system and also raises objections to state testing for using kids "as test subjects, year after year."

The statement can be found on the district's website: newpaltz.k12.ny.us

You might remember that New Paltz had one of the highest opt-out rates in the region when the tests were offered to students in grades 3-8 in April.

Among the district's students who were eligible to take the exams, 62 percent refused the English tests and 65 percent opted out of the math tests.

Now, the district is calling on the Board of Regents, the governor and lawmakers among others to declare an immediate moratorium on current testing mandates.

"We have heard from a number of other districts and education professionals who have expressed a desire to co-sign or adapt the paper for use by their organizations, including board members from the Kinderhook Central School District, as well as from the West Genesee Teachers' Association," said Brian Cournoyer, New Paltz school board president.

Those who oppose the state tests were also cheered by the newest study from the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz, which tackled the subject of the time required to administer the tests. The study makes the claim that the tests consumed double the 1 percent limit on annual instructional time allowed by law.

The newest developments are encouraging.

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