

Testimony

by Andrea Vecchio

We have all seen the numbers. New York's public schools rank number one in school taxes/spending yet rank a dismal 38th in our students graduating from high school. More money or more schooling or more of the same is not the answer. A revolution in how we educate is.

Students who are stuck in stagnant schools with sub par instructors are not being served whatever the cost and property owners who must pay the bill are increasingly stuck in their own overtaxed homes. Meanwhile, thanks to the Triborough Amendment, public educators with their forever contracts, lifetime tenure and guaranteed pay hikes are insulated from the world outside. Years of taxpayer groups pleading that in hard times educators "share the pain" were met instead with double digit tax hikes that taxpayers were helpless to prevent. School districts often manipulated the budget numbers so that our taxes would be higher if we dared to vote down the budget. More recently as the housing bubble burst while our home values declined precipitously school taxes continued to go up each year. Many homes will not be sold despite record low prices and mortgage rates solely because of the heavy tax burden they carry.

The passage of the tax cap law was a welcome sign that things may be about to change. The cap 2% limit has stabilized the rate of increase and controlled the school district's formerly unchecked power to tax. What was crucial to the law was that a "no" vote (albeit) on a second vote will result in a "0%" increase. The taxpayers right to cast a "no" vote and have it count has been restored.

Despite the fact that the tax cap was enormously popular, almost as soon as the tax cap law was passed educators were at work with plans to override the cap thinking it would be easy to spin the case for higher taxes and gain the 60% needed to override to cap. Many of the override districts were on Long Island where up to now - well meaning parents have been willingly misled by the false notion that you can never spend too much money on schools. As a result Long Island has teachers and administrators with top salaries of \$150,000. to \$400,000. Thankfully most district taxpayers agreed with the tax cap and voted down the cap killing overrides.

Unfortunately the teacher's union never gives up. It was reported recently that NYSUT President Ianuzzi is filing a lawsuit to strike down the 60% requirement to override the tax cap claiming it is

“undemocratic” that it violates the constitutional “one person, one vote” protections that give every person’s vote the same weight. Since tax cap proponents must vote twice if the first vote is defeated - a first vote and the a revote.... yet no revote was required for a “yes” result. So for years taxpayers have had to vote “no” twice to equal one of their “yes” votes. Same weight ? Democratic?.... Just not for taxpayers. NYSUT should forget the lawsuit, save the legal fees and accept the cap.

The best way to ensure the tax cap is effective is to find a way to alter the Triborough Amendment to let teacher’s step and level raises expire with the contract. This was the case before the Amendment was enacted. There is much more that needs to be worked on and discarded in contract negotiation reform but that one change will enable School Boards to actually negotiate for the benefit of taxpayers which is not possible with present contracts which keep “all terms and conditions in place “ until a new agreement is reached . Most of these contracts date back decades. Nothing has been taken out but much has been added. These contracts need to expire. A new contract should be agreed to that is fair to both sides. And it should be negotiated in the open not shrouded in secrecy from those who will pay for it as it is now.

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