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Editorial: School votes are imperative

Only days before a state panel provides its initial and critically important thoughts on property-tax relief, New York voters Tuesday decide the fate of local school budgets.

It is a nerve-wracking time for both school officials and taxpayers. Education spending continues to greatly outpace the rate of inflation, but many realize there is no more important investment than providing children with good schools, a sound learning environment and healthy student-to-teacher ratios.

Two years ago, the mid-Hudson Valley received statewide attention when 11 of 16 local school budgets were rejected by voters in the first go-around. Last year, districts more than reversed that trend, with 14 of 16 being approved in the initial vote.

If voters reject a school budget, districts essentially have three options:

- Put the budget back up for a re-vote.
- Cut spending and then undertake another vote.
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Studies have shown contingency budgets don't save taxpayers much money, since the great majority of education spending is tied to mandates and contracts, from federal and state tests to teacher salaries.

In recent years, taxpayers have become more organized through various reform groups and have put great pressure on state leaders in particular to do something about how schools are funded. The state has started to address some problems by increasing aid to districts and by replenishing programs that provide favorable reimbursement rates for most building additions and repair projects.

Property taxpayers also are getting help through a tax-rebate program, mainly targeted to middle-class homeowners and senior citizens. Also, before being forced to resign in disgrace amid a sex scandal, Gov. Eliot Spitzer named Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi to head a bipartisan commission to study imposing a cap on local school and government spending.

Many proposed solutions worth considering

Over the years, many proposals have been offered, from gradually eliminating residential school property taxes and replacing them with additional state funding through income taxes, to scaling back the number of mandates on schools. More recently, the provocative notion of using a "circuit-breaker" tax - whereby homeowners would get a rebate if their property tax bill is more than a certain percentage of their income - has been floated by some lawmakers.

Regardless of how the state tax equation shakes out, local school boards must continue to do what they can to keep spending tight, especially in the area of benefits. For instance, the state Comptroller's Office has noted fringe benefits for teachers and other school employees shot up

an average of 12.2 percent a year during the first part of this decade, a trend that simply cannot continue.

Voters are rightly empowered with the opportunity to accept or reject school budgets. Most realize strong schools are essential to communities and tend to increase property values over time. But they also realize New York spends more per pupil than any other state in the nation but doesn't always get the best results. Voters in each district will have to weigh these issues. They also will have to await for the release of the state panel's preliminary findings on property tax reform, an issue that is bound to be with us for the foreseeable future.
