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News Coverage on Unfunded Mandates

Schools Contend With Unfunded State Mandates as a New Year Begins

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As school starts this week, administrators and teachers on the East End are grappling with much more than just reading, writing and arithmetic.

Educators are now facing a slew of new mandates from the New York State Department of Education, which some school administrators are saying could take a toll on already hard-pressed districts.

While major initiatives such as the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA), Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) and Annual Professional Performance Reviews (APPRs) have been praised by local school administrators, many have also expressed concern with the amount of time and money that must be spent to comply with these mandates.

"I do think this will be one of the more challenging years in terms of mandates and in terms of implementing them properly, no doubt about it," said Dr. Carl Bonuso, the new interim superintendent of the Sag Harbor School District, in an interview this week.

At a recent board of education meeting, Bridgehampton superintendent Dr. Lois Favre said that she and other school administrators were "frustrated with the pace of everything that's coming at us from the state."

"It's really a revolutionary time in education, and that's when the most fear comes out," she added.

This year, schools in New York will implement new changes in their English and math curriculums, which will be in line with the national “Common Core” standards. The changes to the curriculum, according to New York State Education Commissioner John King, are meant to get students more “college and career-ready.”

These new standards will be included as teachers and administrators create SLOs — concrete, measurable academic goals for each course. Set at the beginning of the school year, teachers will be evaluated at the end of the year based on how successfully they were able to reach those goals.

According to Bridgehampton School’s principal, John Pryor, most teachers at his school will have to create multiple SLOs because they usually teach several grade levels and classes.

“Small schools have to jump through the same hoops that the bigger schools do, with far more SLOs and far less administrators being able to evaluate the teachers,” Pryor said this week.

Related to SLOs are APPRs, which will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers. Instructors will be scored as highly effective, effective, developing or ineffective based on criteria determined by each school district.

However, 40 percent of the APPR score must be based on student achievement according to the state mandate, such as scores on state exams. The rest can be based on other criteria, like in-class observations.

While the criteria for APPRs vary from district to district, schools will have to cope with what Pryor called an “incredible” amount of data that must be collected and analyzed in order to track student progress.

“It’s not getting every student in your class to excel it’s being able to prove that every student in your class had some growth over the past year,” he said. “You’ve got to be able to prove it, and the only way right now is through data.”

Another major mandate is the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA), which officially took effect in July. The act addresses the issue of bullying by prohibiting discrimination and harassment in schools due to race, weight, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, gender, disability and other factors.

For Pryor, DASA has “been a long time coming.”

“It’s just about being kind to each other,” he said. “There is no room for harassment in the world. I’m absolutely, totally in favor of something that makes the school safer and more inviting to all students.”

Also praising DASA, Dr. Bonuso emphasized the importance of “making sure that that policy has teeth.” He added that various presentations and anti-bullying training would need to be done at schools as a result of the mandate.

“There are sub-tasks to be done. [The mandates] are all very complicated and require a number of incremental steps, and very energetic and consistent implementation,” he explained.

However, not all of the mandates that are taking effect will be funded. Dr. Bonuso said that could be a challenge. This year, school districts, municipalities and public libraries will still be operating under a state mandated two-percent property tax levy cap, constraining schools in any spending increases while they also contend with the rising cost of health care and teacher retirement.

“My concern is that the mandates, as important as they might be, very often come with a concomitant cost, and too often we have unfunded mandates where we’re not supplied with the money to implement them. We’re left sort of on our own to sort of figure that out,” said Dr. Bonuso.

Still, local school administrators remain confident in their districts’ ability to rise to the challenge.

“This is a much more scientific-based way of doing education than we have seen in the past 20, 30 years, and anytime you have a dramatic change in the way you do business, there are always bumps in the road. But I think once we get started, it’s going to be easier and easier,” Pryor said.

He added: “It’s a big project, but we will be successful.”

Dr. Bonuso agreed.

“No matter how challenging the year, I have absolutely no doubt that we have a team in place in Sag Harbor that can address any challenge.”

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