

## Five districts receive community schools funding



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*Some say funding for community schools is inconsistent and could be a cause for concern about their future.*



*(Photo: Ricky Flores/The Journal News)*

Five high-need districts in the Lower Hudson Valley are set to receive a portion of \$100 million from the state for initiatives that go beyond the classroom.

East Ramapo, Mount Vernon, Peekskill, Port Chester-Rye and Yonkers will get a combined total of \$5.6 million. Community school programs funded by this initiative include legal assistance, parent workshops, after-school literacy programs and access to healthcare professionals, among others.

Peekskill was awarded \$500,000 in 2014 and used it toward after-school academic programs and workshops. This school year, the district is receiving \$230,795, with which it plans to sustain those programs and expand them from Hillcrest Elementary School to its middle and high schools.

The funding “allows our students to extend their school day, allows our parents to come into the school environment and it allows our staff to work one-on-one and directly with our parents on a variety of initiatives,” said Peekskill Schools Superintendent David Fine.

**[BUDGET \(/story/news/politics/politics-on-the-hudson/2016/05/18/ny-school-budgets-pass-overwhelmingly/84533242/\)S \(/story/news/politics/politics-on-the-hudson/2016/05/18/ny-school-budgets-pass-overwhelmingly/84533242\): NY school budgets pass, overwhelmingly \(/story/news/politics/politics-on-the-hudson/2016/05/18/ny-school-budgets-pass-overwhelmingly/84533242/\)](#)**

Peekskill has 3,100 students, 69 percent of whom are considered economically disadvantaged, according to state data from 2014-15.

Edwin Quezada, Yonkers' schools chief, said the district has implemented the community school model in seven of its 39 buildings to offer health and social services to students through partnerships with organizations including SMILE Dental and Westchester Jewish Community Services. The investment, Quezada said, has improved student achievement, but continuing those services won't be possible without further funding.

This year, Yonkers will receive more than \$4 million.

“Its strength is the partnership between education and community resources,” Quezada said of the initiative. “However, it is costly to implement. It requires the ongoing and enhanced commitment from community partners and the state to meet the diverse needs of our families.”

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**The Hillcrest Elementary School in Peekskill.** *(Photo: Ricky Flores/The Journal News)*

As of December, Yonkers' district had 26,736 students, which is about 4,400 students [over capacity \(/story/news/education/2016/05/24/yonkers-population-study/84858700/\)](#). According to state figures from 2014-15, 79 percent of the students are considered economically disadvantaged.

Robert Reis, a parent of children in the Port Chester school district and a teacher in White Plains, said he has seen first-hand the success of community school initiatives like providing counseling and dental care for students who otherwise wouldn't have those services.

"If you expect children to succeed, you can't just limit that to the school day between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m.," he said. "They need to be healthy physically and emotionally and they need to know that they've been supported."

The state Education Department announced earlier this month that 225 high-need school districts in the state were identified to receive a portion of the \$100 million. In the state budget, the money was set aside from Foundation Aid, which accounts for most state school aid and doles out those funds based on districts with the most need.

This is the second wave of funding that is helping push forward Gov. Andrew Cuomo's community school initiative. Cuomo announced the initiative in 2013 in conjunction with a [grant program \(/story/news/local/westchester/2014/01/15/east-ramapo-yonkers-schools-awarded-state-grants/4500849/\)](/story/news/local/westchester/2014/01/15/east-ramapo-yonkers-schools-awarded-state-grants/4500849/) he said would help transform distressed public schools into "community institutions that serve the needs of our neighborhoods."

Some education experts, however, are concerned that the change in funding for the state's community schools is inconsistent. They said without consistency, the initiative, which is expensive to sustain and takes years to develop, may not be properly implemented.

"These are poor school districts that have no way to sustain these programs if the state pulls the rug out from under them," said Billy Easton, executive director of Alliance for Quality Education, a New York-based nonprofit education coalition.

The Port Chester-Rye school district has had community school programs since 2002, which have been expanded over time with the help of state and federal funding as well as collaborations with over a dozen organizations in the community. For example, the district has had a partnership with the Open Door Family Medical Center to provide primary healthcare access in its school buildings to more than 3,000 of the district's 4,500 students.

In Port Chester-Rye, 72 percent of students are economically disadvantaged and 25 percent don't speak English as their native language, according to state data from 2014-15. The district is receiving \$241,428 this year in community schools funding.

Joe Durney, an assistant superintendent in the Port Chester-Rye school district, said the key to being able to provide and expand its community school services for more than a decade despite inconsistent funding is perseverance.

"When one funding source goes away, you have to look for other funding services," Durney said. "The special sauce of this is a willingness to collaborate to benefit the kids and if people are willing to do that and have students in need you find a way."

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