

Like other educational leaders across the state, Croton-Harmon school officials knew they were spending a lot of money to meet requirements set down by lawmakers 100 miles to the north.

There was the range of smaller-scale budget items required by the Albany educational bureaucracy: cancer screenings for staff, buying defibrillators, stocking eco-friendly cleaning products that cost more than standard products.

Then there were the big ones like special education transportation, testing and auditing costs. But because of the convoluted accounting and financial processes involved, the question of how much money it added up to was never easy to determine.

Now, after putting in hundreds of hours of her own time, and consulting with the business staff at the Croton-Harmon administration, school board President Karen Zevin says she came up with the answer: 17 percent of district spending was typically used to cover unfunded mandates from Albany per year and it could grow to 20 percent when legal costs run high. Six other districts in the region carried out a similar research project and came up with comparable numbers - 15 percent to 28 percent of their budgets spent on state mandates in the 2008-09 school year.

"We wanted to show where we were spending money and how much the state is shifting costs onto our backs," said Zevin, who works in market research. "And the numbers get huge."

The Carmel school district reported 17 percent of its budget was spent on unfunded mandates, while Hendrick Hudson spent 15 percent. Lakeland reported spending 28 percent. All told, the seven districts in northern Westchester and Putnam that compiled the data showed a 21 percent share of their budgets going toward unfunded state requirements.

State mandates are just that and individual school districts can't tinker with them. "When we make reductions, we're not making reductions in that part of the pie," said Hendrick Hudson schools Superintendent Daniel McCann.

And even though the cost of inspecting fire extinguishers doesn't amount to much on its own, "those little ones add up to a big cost," said Garrison schools Superintendent Gloria Colucci.

Some of the big costs in Croton-Harmon involve more than \$553,000 in testing costs and \$526,000 to "warehouse" data. And \$279,000 more was spent on special-education legal costs.

Croton-Harmon, along with its six partners in the so-called Regional Educational Advocacy District, are now aiming to publicize the data and meet with state leaders.

With the state as much as \$11 billion in the red, regional education officials aren't expecting much help from Albany. But they are trying to impress on state leaders that regulations on schools, no matter how well-intentioned or worthy, need to be carefully weighed.

"Nobody looks at what it all costs," said Lakeland school board Vice President Carol Ann Dobson.

State Education Department spokesman Jonathan Burman said the issue is a major priority.

"The Board of Regents and the commissioner are keenly aware of the challenges that schools and school districts are facing in these very difficult times," Burman said. "For the past several years they have been examining appropriate ways to reduce the burden of unfunded mandates."

Burman cited special education regulations and planning and reporting requirements as being scrutinized.

**Croton-Harmon, other school districts seek relief from unfunded mandates
Robert Marchant; the Journal News; Jan 19, 2011; pg. A.4**