



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Shelley B. Mayer

## Times Union: Amendment will help level the playing field for small city schools

JOHN T. MCDONALD III October 11, 2023

Commentary: Measure on New Yorkers' November ballot will make it easier for these school districts to maintain, improve their buildings

When you vote in November, you will see a constitutional amendment question related to small cities' school districts on the ballot. You may wonder: What does this mean?

The ballot will present to voters the following question: "The proposed amendment to Article 8, section 4 of the Constitution removes the special constitutional debt limitation now placed on small city school districts, so they will be treated the same as all other school districts. Shall the proposed amendment be approved?"

Does this mean that the debt limit for small city schools will be unlimited? Absolutely not.

What will happen if the amendment is passed, along with [a bill](#) I supported this past year with state Sen. Shelley Mayer is that small city school districts will finally be equal to the large suburban and rural districts when it comes to capital projects and debt limits.

The amendment and the legislation combined would align the limitations on indebtedness for small city school districts with the limits on all other fiscally independent school districts, subject to annual votes on their proposed budgets and tax levies. Put more directly: Small city school districts would not receive special treatment if this bill and the constitutional

amendment become law. In fact, they would finally be treated the same as school systems serving suburban and rural communities.

Currently, under the state constitution, small city school districts cannot incur debt more than 5% of their average full value of taxable real estate, except with approval by 60% of voters, the state comptroller, and the Board of Regents. In contrast, large suburban and rural districts have no constitutionally prescribed debt limits, but they do have a statutory limit of 10%. Therefore, small city school districts are at a severe disadvantage when it comes to maintaining and improving facilities.

The constitutional amendment and this bill would ensure all schools are subject to the same rules. Additionally, in debt limit calculations, school districts will be able to offset state building aid for capital projects; this helps districts finance projects.

What this means is that if you live in one of New York's 57 small city school districts, the process to streamline and modernize your local school buildings will be simplified. These projects include building maintenance, asbestos abatement and renovation work related to the health and safety of our children, along with updating classrooms with needed technology.

And if you don't live in a small city school district? This amendment does not impact you. It only brings these other districts onto the same playing field.

To read the full amendment and the ballot language, you can visit the state Board of Elections website at [elections.ny.gov/2023BallotProposals.html](https://elections.ny.gov/2023BallotProposals.html).

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