

New York Governor Cuomo's second term to continue assault on public education

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The first term of Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo (2011-2014) was characterized by cuts to social spending, particularly for public education. His second term, which began on January 1, promises a continuation of these policies.

Students and teachers are returning to school after the winter break amid austerity measures at the local, state, and federal levels that have increased class sizes, cut programs, eliminated teachers' positions, and axed extracurricular activities throughout the state.

Since 2008, funding for education in New York State has been decimated. The state cut the share of its budget going to education by 5.3 percent between 2008 and 2012, followed by additional cuts in 2013 and only minor funding restorations in 2014.

In 2011, the first year of Cuomo's tenure, the state legislature passed a budget that cut some \$1.5 billion from education.

That year, the New York State School Boards Association conducted a poll of public school superintendents over how they planned to respond to the budget cuts. More than half planned on increasing class sizes, due primarily to massive teacher layoffs since 2008, reducing or eliminating extracurricular activities including sports, reducing elective courses, deferring maintenance, and reducing extra help for students. Eight percent planned on closing at least one school building.

Making matters worse, most federal "stimulus" aid for K-12 education expired in 2012, while in 2013 other federal aid for education—which had previously offset some of the state-level cuts—was severely reduced with the so-called "sequester" cuts.

The great majority of US states spent less per-pupil in the 2013-2014 school year than they did prior to the recession. New York now spends \$405 less per pupil

than it did in 2008, adjusted for inflation. This has left local school districts with massive budgetary shortfalls, leading them to raise taxes, slash spending, or both.

Proposals to raise local taxes to offset state and federal cuts have been hampered by a measure signed by Cuomo in 2011. This measure blocks school districts from raising property tax levies above 2 percent unless approved by a supermajority of 60 percent.

If a school budget fails to win approval, the district can call a second vote. If that fails, districts are prohibited from raising spending levels, forcing them to institute bare-bones budgets with deep cuts. With these consequences in mind, seeking a 60 percent supermajority is risky and could result in disastrous consequences for school districts. As a result, many districts have kept budgets below the 2 percent levy limit rather than risk rejection.

As a result of this law, school district budgets have passed by well over 50 percent but failed to reach the 60 percent supermajority. For example, Brookfield Central School District's 2013-2014 budget failed because it was four-tenths of a vote shy of the supermajority. It was passed in a second round, but other districts were not as fortunate.

West Irondequoit Central School District, located in Monroe County near Rochester, saw its budget defeated twice, each time receiving between 50 and 60 percent support. As a result, it cut field trips, sports, course offerings, and at least six teachers' positions, affecting nearly 4,000 students in the area.

Minerva Central School District also saw its budget defeated a second time, forcing similarly massive cuts. Sayville, West Babylon, Dover, and Tuxedo all passed budgets in re-votes—required because they failed to make the supermajority—that were less than originally

requested by the school district.

Meanwhile, Cuomo has ruthlessly promoted charter schools as a way to “break” public schools and “hold teachers accountable.”

Cuomo told the *New York Daily News*, “I believe these kinds of changes [promoting charter schools] are probably the single best thing that I can do as governor that’s going to matter long-term, to break what is in essence one of the only remaining public monopolies.” He claimed that charter schools provide “real performance measures with some competition, which is why I like charter schools.”

New York City is reaching the high end of the legislative cap on the number of charter schools, and there is every indication that Cuomo will press the state legislature to raise the cap this year.

Under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, education is being systematically dismantled. This is true at the federal level, with Bush’s No Child Left Behind and Obama’s Race to the Top, and the municipal level, where New York City Mayor de Blasio, a self-styled “progressive,” has continued the policies of the hated Michael Bloomberg in promoting charter schools and other privatization measures.



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