

New York State budget proposals intensify attack on public education

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26 March 2015

The state budget proposal by New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo and the counter-proposals by the two houses of the state legislature—one controlled by Republicans and the other by Democrats—all represent a continued assault on public education.

Cuomo's budget makes an increase of \$1.1 billion in school funding contingent on various measures intended to dismantle public education, including an intensified use of student test scores to gauge the effectiveness of teachers and schools, a streamlining of procedures for dismissal of teachers, and promoting a substantial expansion of privately run, but publicly funded charter schools. These measures are part of Cuomo's long-standing goal of driving down teacher compensation and turning schools over to private investors, following the pattern set by the Obama administration under its Race to the Top (RTTT) program.

If these measures are not approved, the increase in funding would drop to a paltry \$377 million, worsening the already critical state of local school district budgets. Even Cuomo's higher figure does not come close to relieving the substantial deficit in public school funding which was officially recognized nearly a decade ago. Under either scenario, the quality of public schools will continue to deteriorate.

In 2006, as the result of a decade-long lawsuit brought by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE), the state was ordered to rectify substantial underfunding of public schools. Nearly a decade later, the situation remains largely unchanged. State funding for education has barely returned to the level that existed prior to deep cuts made by the Paterson and Cuomo administrations during the initial period of the economic crisis beginning in 2008. Funding levels projected for the coming fiscal year are \$5.7 billion below what they should have been according to the CFE settlement.

The assault on public education is not limited to the Cuomo administration, or to a single party. The higher levels of funding proposed by each chamber of the legislature, \$1.9 billion from the Republican-controlled Senate and \$1.8 billion from the Assembly, which has a Democratic majority, do not reach even half of the amount needed to

close the gap with the funding level projected by the 2006 settlement. The Senate is also proposing an increase in the cap on the number of charter schools as well as a rise in the per pupil payment to charters.

The two percent cap on local tax increases proposed by Cuomo and passed by the State Legislature two years ago has prevented local school districts from raising revenue to compensate for inadequate state support, further exacerbating the desperate financial conditions faced by many districts. The state also instituted a program of so-called competitive grants, which forces districts to compete for meager additional support by instituting "efficiencies." A group of school districts is currently suing the state for failure to provide adequate funding.

The continued economic strangulation of public education stands in sharp contrast to the huge profits being made by corporations and financial institutions, particularly in New York City, home of Wall Street.

The refusal to fund public education is justified by Cuomo and others with the mantra that money is not the answer, but rather teachers are to blame. The governor has openly stated his intention to break the "monopoly" of the public schools through the expansion of charters.

A recently released report by the Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI) makes clear that childhood poverty and inadequate school funding are the cause of the state's problems in educational outcomes, rather than poor teaching. The state classifies 178 schools in 17 districts as "priority" or "failing" schools.

The study's findings include:

- In districts with "priority" schools (i.e. classified as poorly performing), three times as many school-aged children live in poverty as in average New York school districts.
- More than 75 percent of students in priority districts qualify for the free or reduced lunch program, based on their family's financial situation.
- More than 90 percent of students in priority schools are minority students, who may not be proficient in English or

who come from families with high levels of unemployment and poverty.

The study criticizes Cuomo's proposals for the intensification of teacher evaluations and the promotion of charter schools as ways to remedy "underperforming" schools.

Even among traditional public schools, a class divide is developing. A recent article in the *New York Daily News*, entitled "PTA Inc.," illustrates how income differences are making a significant impact on the quality of education in wealthier areas. Parents with the means are funding additional teachers, special programs and supplies to make up for inadequate government budgets. The students in poorer areas are left to suffer the consequences of cutbacks.

The drive to dismantle public schools and expand charters is seen as a golden opportunity for private business. The Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation sponsored a recent conference at the Harvard Club in Manhattan, entitled "Bonds & Blackboards: Investing in Charter Schools," to promote the idea that there is money to be made in charter schools. Those in attendance hardly needed convincing. Hedge fund managers have already made huge donations to politicians who support the expansion of charters.

Since 2000, 570 hedge fund managers have reportedly made nearly \$40 million in political contributions in New York State, plus tens of millions to a range of pro-charter groups, many of their own creation. Collectively, this vast flow of money dwarfs the efforts of anti-charter groups, including the teachers unions and other organizations. The biggest single beneficiary of hedge fund largesse has been the governor, who received \$4.8 million.

These investments have already paid off. In addition to raising the cap on the number of charter schools, the governor and legislature have approved a substantial increase in government payments to charters, up to \$2,600 more per pupil. There is now a proposal in the State Senate to provide significant tax credits for donations to schools from outside sources, both public and private, creating the opportunity for corporations and wealthy individuals to become directly involved in determining the course of education. This is seen as a step toward the creation of a school voucher program, which would effectively privatize public education. The combination of free public money and tax credits make charters a highly lucrative prospect for private investors.

Recently, Cuomo spoke at a pro-charter school rally in the state capitol, at which thousands of charter school students from across the state were taken out of class and bused to Albany. A week later, a counter-rally, organized by teachers unions and other organizations, was held in support of

traditional public schools. Cuomo did not attend.

The drive to dismantle public education also targets protections for teachers against arbitrary discipline and dismissal. A more vulnerable workforce would drive down costs and thus boost the profits of private investors. The governor is reportedly displeased with the teacher evaluation program he initially promoted, because they did not produce the desired results—too few teachers received low ratings.

He now proposes that 50 percent of teacher evaluations be based on student test scores. The head of New York's Board of Regents, which oversees schools in the state, wants to eliminate teachers and principals from participation in the design of teacher evaluations. In addition, proposals have been put forward to streamline (i.e., speed up) dismissal of "ineffective" teachers.

Despite the non-stop propaganda offensive vilifying teachers, the general public has not been convinced. A recent Quinnipiac University poll found that 63 percent of voters in New York disapprove of Cuomo's performance on education issues, while only 28 percent approve. An overwhelming 71 percent of those polled are opposed to teacher evaluations based on student test scores, and 65 percent do not believe such scores should determine tenure. Furthermore, Quinnipiac reported that 55 percent of voters trusted the teachers unions to improve education, versus 28 percent who said they trusted the governor.

Nevertheless, the unions, which are tied hand and foot to the Democratic Party, have made no effort to mobilize this massive support among the working class to defend public education. Rather, they have relied on toothless rallies, advertising campaigns and maneuvering with politicians to create a semblance of opposition, all the while collaborating fully with the destruction of public education, asking only for a "seat at the table."

The state's teachers unions, including the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City and New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) statewide, do not oppose charter schools in principle, and even run some of their own. They originally supported the development of teacher evaluations based on student testing as part of Obama's RTTT, which they now claim are too harsh. In fact, the unions gave tacit support to Cuomo in his re-election campaign last year, hoping to curry favor with his government.



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