

New York Governor Cuomo cuts financial aid to immigrants from state budget

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New York's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo, last month, shelved a proposed Dream Act that would have allowed high school graduates who are undocumented immigrants access to financial aid for college. Cuomo termed pursuit of the measure in his 2016 budget "pointless" after failing to get a deal with state Republicans linking the act to a proposal for education tax credits covering donations to public schools and scholarships for students at private and religious schools.

Cuomo made the act, which would have benefitted an estimated 4,500 immigrant students a year, a central issue in his 2014 campaign for re-election.

After having secured his second term, however, Cuomo, the son of previous New York Democratic governor Mario Cuomo, did nothing to promote the measure, outside of the unsuccessful attempt to tie it to the tax credits in an attempt to win Republican support. Advocates of the legislation, who had initially hoped that it would be enacted this year, expressed frustration over Cuomo's failure to push for the act.

"When we talk about Dreamers going to college, we're talking about young people who have already overcome tough obstacles to get to where they are," Cesar Vargas, co-director of the Dream Action Coalition, said in a statement released after the dropping of the legislation. "This hard work is being ignored by [Cuomo] who knows this and still is not willing to put money behind merit. Gov. Cuomo has clearly shown he wasn't willing to fight for the Dream Act."

Instead, both Cuomo and the state legislature focused on passage of a package of education counter-reforms aimed at the further dismantling of the public school system through the funding of privately run but publicly funded charter schools, and measures aimed at

streamlining the firing of teachers and driving down their compensation.

If passed, the Dream Act's estimated cost would have amounted to merely \$27 million out of a budget of \$141 billion, according to education officials. Currently only four states—California, Washington, New Mexico and Texas—allow for undocumented high school graduates to receive financial aid for college.

Roughly 50 immigrant students rallied in downtown Manhattan, on March 25, demanding that the Dream act be put back into the budget. They carried out a weeklong hunger strike that ended on March 31, the day before the budget was passed.

New York is one of the few states that allow undocumented high school students to apply to state schools as state residents. The cost for students attending State University of New York (SUNY) schools is still extremely high, with tuition for the 2014-2015 school year amounting to over \$6,000 for full time students. The total cost for students paying for room and board is \$19,602, according to the SUNY website.

Undocumented immigrants throughout the country often face higher levels of poverty since they are frequently paid below minimum wage. Roughly 28 percent of first generation immigrant children lived below the poverty line in 2014, according to Children Trends Data Bank.

The decision by Cuomo to drop a minor reform targeting immigrant youth mirrors national politics, with Democrats posturing as friends of immigrants and blaming Republicans for blocking immigration reform, even as the Obama administration continues to carry out record numbers of deportations. Both parties have proven to be hostile to both native-born and immigrant youth, who are often forced to choose between massive

student debt and not attending college.

Alex Nuenz, a student at Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York City, which has a large number of students from immigrant backgrounds, told the WSWs: “I don’t understand why Cuomo did not pass it. It would have helped a lot of people. Some friends of mine are undocumented, and they were happy about the tuition money. One friend of mine cheered when he thought it was going to be passed, and he would be able to go to school and get tuition paid.

“But Cuomo did not do this, and my friend was mad today because he can’t go to school and have it paid for. He had been saving up to go to school. He didn’t really have much hope for the Dream Act, and he suspected that it wouldn’t pass. Everybody in my neighborhood said it wouldn’t pass. Everyone there says the politicians in Albany don’t care about us. Nobody cares about the working class.

“People are also afraid to go to school and build up the tuition debt they can’t get paid off. The plain truth is the rich are doing what they do for money.”



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