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# Cuomo proposal to undo aid formula sends ripples through ed world

'This repeals the current design and starts over'

Zachary Matson | January 18, 2017



Schenectady High School exterior.

PHOTOGRAPHER: LINDSAY DIETERICH/FOR THE DAILY GAZETTE

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What could be one of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's most consequential education proposals in his budget roll-out surfaced slowly on Wednesday as lawyers and researchers in education organizations waded through legislative language.



But by the end of the day, the consensus was clear: Cuomo was seeking to dramatically alter how state education aid levels are calculated each year.

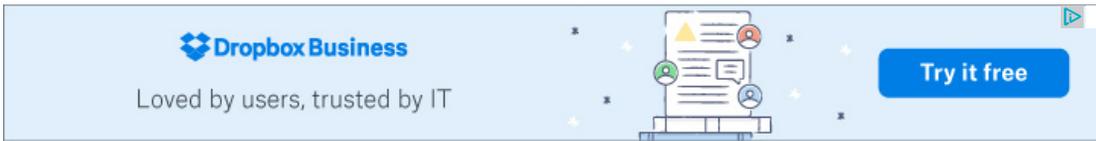
"This repeals the current design and starts over," said Bob Lowry of the New York State Council of School Superintendents.



The proposal, tucked away in dense legislative language, would use the 2017-2018 district funding levels as the baseline for determining future allocations and would eliminate calculations of how much districts would receive if the state foundation aid formula were ever fully phased-in. That formula is currently underfunded by over \$4 billion, according to the state Education Department.

The New York School Boards Association also called the proposal a “repeal” of the foundation aid formula. New York State United Teachers said they were concerned with the proposal and would “strenuously oppose” an effort to dramatically alter the formula. The Alliance for Quality Education, which advocates for increased school funding, called it an “unprecedented assault” on the education of mostly minority students.

“This is less predictable and less transparent,” Lowry said. “So it is disappointing the state might be moving away from the basic design of foundation aid.”



By effectively repealing the foundation aid formula, which spells out how much each district need to provide students a basic education, the governor could remove a key political bludgeon used by educators, activists and some lawmakers to show just how much the state shortchanges its own funding formula.

Cuomo's press office did not respond to a request for comment late Wednesday afternoon.

Each year state officials use the wonky foundation aid formula to figure out what districts need to provide the constitutionally-mandated “sound basic education.” Starting with a base figure from districts deemed proficient, the formula adjusts for regional costs, poverty and other student needs and a community's ability to fund schools before landing on a district's allocation.

Last year, for example, the formula said Schenectady needed over \$135 million; Niskayuna needed around \$14.7 million; Mohonasen needed over \$15 million; Amsterdam needed \$39.6 million.

None of those districts, however, actually received those levels of state aid as lawmakers have yet to fully-fund the formula that was established a decade ago. Schenectady was nearly \$50 million short; Niskayuna was over \$4 million short; Mohonasen was over \$2.4 million short; Amsterdam was over \$11 million short.

But the conversation appeared to turn a corner last year after the Legislature eliminated Recession-era cuts – the Gap Elimination Adjustment – and more and more lawmakers said it was time to focus squarely on foundation aid.



The Board of Regents last month proposed boosting foundation aid by \$1.4 billion this year as a down payment on phasing-in the outstanding \$4.3 billion in foundation aid over three years. Democratic lawmakers have similarly called for a three-year phase-in of “full funding.”

The governor's budget proposal, which he released Tuesday night, increases total education spending by \$1 billion, but nearly a quarter of that was tied up in specific proposals that not all districts would get a cut of or other unspecified spending. His proposal boosted foundation aid spending statewide by just over \$427 million – an increase of 2.6 percent.

Some in the education world said the governor's overall budget proposal may not be enough to keep up rising costs and maintain current programs. A coalition of education groups, the Educational Conference Board, estimated that it would take \$1.1 billion statewide to provide the same level of services to students as districts are providing this year.

“Certainly, people were hoping for a whole lot more,” said John Yagielski, head of Capital Region BOCES and a former superintendent in local districts. “With the little I know, I'm on the disappointed side as an opening.”

In Schenectady County, Schenectady schools would receive the largest foundation aid increase, with a 2 percent bump worth \$1.74 million. Duanesburg would receive the smallest increase in the county, with a 1.2 percent boost worth just over \$50,000.

Schenectady Superintendent Larry Spring, who has criticized the governor in the past for his handling of school funding, said the proposal is just a starting point in the budget process, and he expressed optimism that the district would see a bigger funding increase than the governor's proposal.

Last year, Schenectady saw a final state aid increase that was about four times the governor's original proposal. Nevertheless, Spring said any effort to try and wipe away the broader funding targets spelled out under foundation aid would be “unconscionable.”

With the governor's proposed budget language, those foundation aid distributions when then serve as a basis for future years' budgets. The districts would receive their 2017-2018 funding levels plus an increase based partially on some of the factors that go into the current foundation aid formula. But the overarching goal of moving toward a full phase-in amount would be eliminated, according to the New York State Association of School Business Officials.

“(The governor's proposal) eviscerates the foundation aid formula by severing the connection with the full phase-in amount,” said Michael Borges, executive director of the business officials association. “That full phase-in amount is the cost of student success.”

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