

School leaders seek state aid 'runs' with budget presentation

Educators say holding back estimates makes it hard to plan for local school budget votes

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Albany

Since taking office Gov. **Andrew Cuomo** has made some changes to the January rituals that kick off the legislative season.

He moved the State of the State speech from the **Assembly chamber** to the **Empire State Plaza Convention Hall**. This year he is combining the speech with his budget presentation, which will be Wednesday.

Last year he broke with tradition by not providing the school "runs," written estimates of how much money the state's nearly 700 school districts are slated to get under his budget proposal.

Local school boards were taken aback, saying it hurt their planning process leading up to the May budget votes.

This year it remains unknown whether Cuomo's budget proposal will once again come without the school runs.

Education advocates say they've requested a return to releasing the estimates with the budget proposal. The governor's Budget Division isn't saying what the plans are.

"We still don't know yet if the aid runs will come out this year," said **Dave Albert**, spokesman for the **New York State School Boards Association**.

"People were shocked last year that there were no runs," added **Deborah Cunningham**, director of education and research for the **New York State**

Association of School Business Officials.

Cunningham said withholding the aid runs could be a tactical move. While putting schools at a disadvantage, the lack of solid numbers could mean there is less conflict. "If you don't have them you don't fight over them," she said of the runs.

With the public voting on the annual school budgets in May, local school boards need to finalize their spending plans in April. Having a rough estimate of how much money they'll get from the state can help with those plans.

Granted, the state budget, which is supposed to be completed by April 1, has been on time in recent years.

"We do hope the governor will not repeat what he did last year and that he will include the school aid runs with the budget," said **Robert Lowry**, associate director of the **New York State Council of School** Superintendents.

Typically, the governor proposes a certain level of school aid increase, while the **Senate and Assembly** offer other numbers. What then follows is a lengthy negotiation which leads to the final budget in April. Part of the negotiation includes lots of backroom deal-making among regional or geographic factions, in which lawmakers fight to bring home as much education money as possible to their districts. This has been one of the organizing principles of the Long Island bloc of Senate Republicans. They've long worked to produce as much school aid as possible. That's helped them at home but provoked complaints from other regions and cities in the state.

Without runs, legislators as well as local school officials have less data with which to argue their cases.

Last year Cuomo not only held back the runs, but also used the promise of a \$1.1 billion increase in aid to get lawmakers to agree to revamping teacher evaluation programs. The plan was reversed in recent months after complaints it was unfair and students were spending too much time on

standardized tests, which helped shape the evaluations.

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