Editorial: Another botched rollout?

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THE ISSUE:

The state delays money that was set aside for struggling schools.

THE STAKES:

New York itself has some learning to do — from its own mistakes. New York had a plan to improve education by imposing more challenging standards on schools. It was a fine idea. But the state fell so short in implementing it that the words "Common Core" have become almost inextricably tied to the phrase "botched rollout."

Now New York has a plan to improve persistently struggling schools, and it's in danger of
botching the rollout of this program, too.

This latest jerk in the state's flailing approach to education emerged at a hearing last week of the Assembly Education Committee. Lawmakers heard an unsurprising message from two dozen educators, administrators, parents and teachers: They can’t keep up with all the solutions-of-the-day that politicians keep hatching. And more could be on the way from Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s new Common Core Task Force — the governor's third education task force in as many years.

The state might start with living up to its own obligations toward education. The same state government that says schools are shortchanging students has shortchanged those schools billions of dollars — money it promised after it lost a lawsuit 14 years ago to the Campaign for Fiscal Equity. CFE had argued that the state failed to comply with its own constitutional mandate to provide children with a sound, basic education. Then came a tax cap designed to keep schools from raising taxes by more than inflation, a reasonable-sounding strategy that in practice has forced many districts to cut not just to the bone, but into it.

Contrast this tightfistedness when it comes to public schools with the news last week that in the last legislative session, the biggest lobbying spender in Albany was a coalition fighting for tax breaks for donors to private and parochial schools — a cause for which Mr. Cuomo strongly fought, and which ultimately failed.

In its latest spasm, the state implemented tough new rules on schools that were deemed struggling and persistently struggling because of low student performance. If the latter — which include Albany’s Hackett Middle School — don’t turn around in a year, they face the prospect of having a state-appointed receiver take over.

Toward that effort, the state promised schools $75 million, but so far, two months into the school year, they have yet to see any money. Schools that were probably struggling in part because of underfunding are forced to struggle to make do until the state gets around to its obligations.

We understand the state wanting to first see their plans, which were due Sept. 30, but just
how long will it take to cut the checks? A week? A month? Six months? A whole school year?

And how, asks the state's new education commissioner, MaryEllen Elia, are schools supposed to show the kind of dramatic improvement they need to in a single year?

Perhaps the Next Big Thing in education needs to be actually doing the Last Big Thing — giving New York's struggling schools what they were promised so they can help themselves.