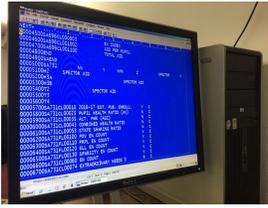


After 30 YEARS, NY may upgrade school-aid software

Joseph Spector , Albany Bureau Chief Published 5:07 p.m. ET Jan. 12, 2017 | Updated 16 hours ago



(Photo: Joseph Spector, Albany Bureau)

ALBANY — On Tuesday, likely as the sun goes down, officials from the state Education Department will participate in an annual routine.

They will walk from their grand 36-columned building on Washington Avenue across the street to the state Capitol, rolling metal carts filled with stacks of paper that provide school-aid estimates for nearly 700 districts.

The antiquated system is the byproduct of one thing: Education officials use a 30-year-old computer program to calculate New York's complex school-funding formula that distributes nearly \$25 billion a year in aid.

For a state that provides the most money to its schools per capita in the nation, the aid relies on a 1987 program written in COBOL, a computer-programming language first designed in 1959.

"It worked then, it continued to work," explained Brian Cechnicki, director of education finance for the state Education Department. "And it's the type of thing that just over time it has become something that if it's not broke, don't fix it."

[BACKGROUND: Why NY's school-aid formula is flunking \(/story/news/local/new-york/2016/08/27/nys-school-aid-formula-flunking/89478616/\)](#)

[DATABASE: Check your district's per pupil aid \(http://pressconnects.nydatabases.com/database/state-aid-school-districts\)](#)

[Q&A: School funding formula FAQ \(/story/news/local/new-york/2016/08/27/know-nys-school-aid-formula/89478742/\)](#)

Indeed, the DOS-based platform isn't broken: It continues to spit out the school aid for each district with precision — based on a community's wealth, ability to pay and other demographic factors.

And the software has migrated over the years to various computer systems, so it runs on the latest computers at the department — not, as one might think, massive computers with huge tubes from decades ago.

But any technology that was developed when Ronald Reagan was president is due for an overhaul. So the state Education Department this year wants to put its old friend into retirement.

It is seeking \$2 million in aid from Gov. Andrew Cuomo to get state-of-the-art programming. The department has requested the money in recent years but has yet to be successful.

The current software has had a Hall of Fame career: It calculates 15 or more formulas for each school district using more than 2.1 million data points, and it tracks 100,000 school-construction projects worth \$75 billion.

The system prints out the data just like it did decades ago, but its speed has improved. One of the big upgrades was fitting 12 districts' funding on one page; they used to be able to fit only six.

Nonetheless, education officials worry about its ongoing reliability.

"The software is no longer supported by the company, and there is a substantial risk that the department will be unable to run it in the near future," the agency's funding request states.

A different era

In New York, the state legislature and governor write laws that dictate how school aid should be distributed. The funding formula, a constant [source of debate \(/story/news/politics/2016/08/25/new-york-school-aid-formula/89326638/\)](#) between educators and the state, is then turned into actual numbers by the Education Department.

How much each school district receives in aid annually is one of the biggest fights at the Capitol.

The aid battle can correlate to property taxes: more state aid should mean less reliance on taxpayers to make up the difference, education officials argue, though that's not always the case ([/story/news/politics/politics-on-the-hudson/2016/06/10/nys-school-spending-87-above-us-average/85695900/](#)).

But to analyze a district's aid can be difficult for the public and even the districts themselves, because of the old computer system. A full school-aid run can take a few days, even up to a week.

Cuomo's spending plan will be released Tuesday.

When the preliminary school-aid runs are released along with the governor's budget proposal, they are provided on paper — and in a PDF.

Trying to convert the data to an Excel spreadsheet is difficult, and the Education Department said it could provide districts' better details with an updated computer system.

Ultimately, the state can convert the data into Excel, but it's not immediate.

"The output reports that they get, which they give in PDFs, are very poorly formatted and very hard to read. They do look like they are out of 1980," said Deborah Cunningham, director of education and research at the state Association of School Business Officials who worked at the Education Department for 33 years.

After the state budget is enacted on March 31, the state Education Department sends each district in the mail a detailed run of its aid for the school year that starts July 1.

Ultimately, the data is moved each summer into the department's other computer system — known as SAMS, or State Aid Management System, which is a more user-friendly portal that districts use for state payments and claims.

The whole process seems mind-numbing in an age where big data is an industry unto itself, some budget watchdog groups said.

"It doesn't make sense to me why they would be going off of something that old, given the complexity and advances in existing technology," said David Friedfel, director of state studies at the Citizens Budget Commission, a business-backed group.

Moving forward

With a new system, the Education Department said it would be able to more rapidly respond to data requests from schools and the public.

For example, the department has an interactive site, called Engage NY (<https://www.engageny.org/>), that lets parents and students learn more about testing standards under the state's Common Core standards.

The department also has its data site (<https://data.nysed.gov/>), but it could be improved with new software.

Also, the old system worked off a mainframe computer, so its archived data is limited. Anything prior to 2009 can be provided only by paper.

A new system would be more easily able to adjust to changes in the school-aid formula, which education advocates and the Board of Regents are clamoring for this year.

The formula itself has been criticized ([/story/news/politics/2016/08/25/new-york-school-aid-formula/89326638/](#)) for using outdated data and not providing a larger proportion to poor districts.

Switching to a new system could be create problems, though.

School leaders are so used to the paper printouts that state officials said they are concerned about confusion if and when they go to a computer-based system.

"Everyone is familiar with those now," Cechnicki said of the paper runs. "So moving away from that to something new would also cause some disruption."

But the old software can only go on for so long: It's getting to a point that the people who knew how to run it simply aren't around anymore.

One woman was the main expert on how to use the system for 30 years. She retired last year, and new people were trained before she left — like the passing of a torch.

Yet when the department hires new data operators, generally young people, they look at the current program as if they are staring under the hood of an old Buick.

“We have IT folks who have been here a long time and very familiar with it, but increasingly as folks retire and new, younger IT staffers are coming in, this is language that nobody is trained in anymore,” Cechnicki said.

He added, “We will eventually get to a point where no one is left who is familiar with it.”

[SED Aid request for new software \(https://www.scribd.com/document/336410134/SED-Aid-request-for-new-software#from_embed\)](https://www.scribd.com/document/336410134/SED-Aid-request-for-new-software#from_embed) by [jspector \(https://www.scribd.com/user/3262579/jspector#from_embed\)](https://www.scribd.com/user/3262579/jspector#from_embed) on Scribd

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