by Peggy Farber
Monday, January 01, 2001 12:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, March 14, 2013 03:28 PM

When Governor George Pataki unveiled his proposed new budget, Michael Rebell was unimpressed. Rebell is the executive director of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, the group that won a landmark lawsuit against with the system for funding public education in the state, which shortchanges students in New York City. The governor's budget calls for combining 11 funding categories into a single block grant and giving local districts discretion over how to spend state money. But Rebell said the plan left much of the old system in place: 35 funding categories were untouched by the Pataki plan.

"We see a lot of baby steps when what the court called for is a complete overhaul," Rebell said. "This budget leaves in place an incomprehensible system that bears no relationship whatsoever to what educating children actually costs."

But it was not just in the field of education that the governor's budget disappointed advocates for kids. "I don't see anything in this budget that indicates a significant investment in New York State children," said Elie Ward, executive director of Statewide Youth Advocacy, Inc. "There are very few surprises anywhere, no new initiatives. It looks like the same old budget."

Day care advocates, alarmed at a shortage of day care programs for low-income families, urged the governor to add $292 million to the state1s Child Care Block Grant, but Pataki held firm. His proposed $840 million block grant contains no new state money.

The governor also slipped a pet plan into the budget that advocates have fought off before: the transfer of juvenile offenders at age 16 from facilities run by the Office of Children and Family Services to state prisons. "This is not a new proposal," said Gabrielle Kriesler, director of program and policy at the Citizens Committee for Children. "But this is not something we are in support of and we1re hoping that the legislature will not agree to it."

One bright spot in the budget, according to Kriesler and others, is Governor Pataki1s restoration of money for preventive services - those services, such as family counseling and drug and alcohol treatment programs, that are aimed at keeping children out of foster care. Pataki

eliminated preventive programs, in effect, in 1995 when he folded prevention and foster care into a single child welfare block grant, cut total child welfare spending by 25 percent, and gave local governments considerable latitude in spending the money. Scrambling to maintain funds for abused and neglected children already in foster care, most local governments - including New York City - dropped preventive programs.

In the new budget, Governor Pataki proposes returning to a system of open funding for preventive services, reimbursing without limit 65 percent of the money local governments spend on these services. "This is a wonderful change because it reinstates the partnership between the state and the counties," Kriesler said.

Veterans of New York State budget battles like Ward and Kriesler urge caution in evaluating Pataki1s budget. "There is nothing that people care about that will not be negotiated and changed over the next few months," said Elie Ward. "In reality the governors budget is just the first shot - and a peek at what the governor is thinking."

Peggy J. Farber is freelance journalist specializing in children's issues. Her reporting on conditions of NYC children has appeared in City Limits Magazine as well as on National Public Radio.