# The Governor's Proposed Budget And Its Effect On NYC Schools

by Sarah Arnold
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In his attempt to plug looming gaps in the state budget, Governor George Pataki has proposed in his new executive budget a series of measures that, by the New York State Education Department's estimate , would cut state aid to New York City schools by more than $462 million. This is nearly nine percent of the city's state education aid. By contrast, the governor's proposed cut to the overall state budget comes to just three percent.

As nine-year old Israel Payero put it to the Daily News : "He's hurting my future."

Both Democratic and Republican members of the New York State legislature have expressed dismay in the governor's plan to balance the budget disproportionately on the backs of schoolchildren. Yet if the governor continues to refuse to increase revenue through taxes, it may be that at least some of the proposed cuts will go into effect. Since 45 percent of the New York City schools' budget comes directly from the state, any cuts in state aid to education would have an impact on city schools greater than it would on most nearby suburban districts, which raise much more of their school budgets from local taxes.

The governor's proposed budget (For more detail, see pages 18 to 30 of this pdf file) would eliminate funding for some programs specifically designed to benefit New York City and other poor urban school districts.

This includes universal pre-kindergarten, which currently provides a half-day of pre-school for some 43,000 four-year-olds in New York City.

It also would eliminate the class size reduction program, which currently keeps classes to 20 students or fewer for more than 120,000 New York City schoolchildren from kindergarten to the third grade. Class size would now be increased to 25 students.

It would eliminate the minor maintenance and repair program, which focuses on the kind of older and larger schools that especially plague New York City (where some school buildings still in use were built a century ago).

"Even as an initial negotiating stance, [we find] it objectionable that the governor should want to eliminate programs that work so well and to create such havoc," testified Martine Guirrier of the Educational Priorities Panel (where I also work), at state budget hearings.

Funding would be reduced for special education services, technology (computer hardware and software), and textbooks.

By changing the funding formula for nine specific aid programs, the governor would be in effect reducing their funding by hundreds of millions of dollars statewide. These include Extraordinary Needs and Operating Standards Aid (both going mostly to high-need districts); Gifted & Talented; Limited English Proficiency Aid; Summer School Aid; Academic Support Aid; Public Excess Cost Aid (which provides most of the funding for special education); and Operating Aid.

Pataki has also floated a proposal to make the governor himself the head of the State Education Department. Because the current system in which the education department is overseen by an appointed Board of Regents was specifically established in the state's constitution in order to shield the state's school children from the vagaries of politics, it is unlikely that the governor's proposal will be embraced. However, one attempt to limit the Regents authority may draw support because of its name: "Mandate Relief.

The higher Regents graduation standards led the way for school districts all over the state to argue for additional financial assistance from the state. While many welcomed the increases, some state leaders privately rued having to spend additional state funding on schools. The governor's proposed "mandate relief" is a thinly-veiled attempt to ensure that the educational needs of children not drive spending. Specifically, the Board of Regents would have to receive approval from the Governor's Office of Regulatory Reform for new regulations that would involve any costs.

Only one of the governor's education proposals might actually wind up improving the situation in New York City schools (at least relatively), by creating a fairer means of distributing school construction aid.

(Please read chapters six and 7 of the Educational Priorities Panel report , Castles in the Sand (in pdf format) for an explanation of how the current system of state aid for school building is

skewed against New York City, and has had a negative impact on city schools.)

Currently, nearly all school building projects submitted by local school districts throughout the state receive some form of aid. The governor is proposing a single albeit complex formula that would put a priority on projects according to need and the resources of the district to meet the need (New York City has moderate resources but the highest student needs of any district), and would take into account the building's age.

Even here, though, there is a bitter coating. Ironically, even if the new school building aid formula has the effect of righting a previous imbalance, it comes as part of the governor's effort to reduce drastically the amount of money spent on school building in general. And the executive budget proposal explicitly limits New York City to between 40 and 60 percent of all state building aid. The only reason this may not matter in the near term is because building aid is already limited by the explicit budget deal made between all legislators each year: i.e., so much money will go to rural upstate regions, so much to small cities, so much — or so little — to New York City.

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