

## Education leaders seek new aid formula

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ALBANY - The head of the state Education Department urged the state Legislature on Tuesday to revamp the state's antiquated school-aid formula and boost the money that goes to the nearly 700 districts in New York.

MaryEllen Elia, the education commissioner, said New York should invest \$2.1 billion into schools for the upcoming fiscal year, more than double the aid proposed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo last month.

Elia said the aid should be coupled with an overhaul of the complex funding formula that hasn't been changed in a decade and uses outdated data on schools' poverty and demographics.

The formula is used to dole out so-called foundation aid — the base pay districts receive from the state.

“Our first priority is to ensure our schools are fairly funded through significant investment in foundation aid,” Elia testified at a budget hearing.

Elia's testimony comes as state lawmakers and Cuomo will soon start budget negotiations in earnest for the fiscal year that starts April 1.

One area of contention is the Democratic governor's plans to change the funding formula so it is no longer tied to previous aid commitments made by then-Gov. Eliot Spitzer in 2007.

Cuomo's office said the formula would better reflect districts' aid needs, but has argued the state is not bound by Spitzer's pledges — which came after the Campaign for Fiscal Equity won a landmark court case for New York City.

His plan, though, appears to face opposition from state lawmakers, who are under pressure from education groups to spend more on schools and reject Cuomo's formula proposal.

“We cannot go forward after a court case, after 20 years of work and effort to have a system of education funding that is not about wheeling and dealing, but is about aligning funding with need,” Assembly Education Committee chairman Cathy Nolan, D-Queens, said at the hearing.

Cuomo is proposing an additional \$1 billion in school aid, a 4 percent increase. That would bring education funding to \$25.6 billion — by far the most per-capita in the nation.

Of that, \$428 million would go to the base aid that districts receive.

The state Board of Regents, which sets education policy in New York, is seeking a \$1.4 billion increase in the foundation aid, part of the \$2.1 billion overall request.

Lawmakers typically add more school aid than the governor proposes as they face requests from schools in their districts for more money.

The sides agree, though, that the formula — which determines how much aid each district receives — needs an overhaul. But how the formula is reformed remains a battle.

A report by the Albany Bureau for the USA Today Network in August found that the formula had myriad problems and was easily manipulated by politicians.

“My honest observation, even within the formula, there’s certain key areas where schools are struggling,” said Assemblyman Peter Lopez, RSchoharie, Schoharie County.

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