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Cuomo antes up on schools as budget dance begins

Nearly \$1 billion boost in aid is called 'anemic'

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It's not quite as big as the Powerball jackpot, but Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo on Wednesday proposed increasing state education aid for the next school year by nearly \$1 billion.

But that's almost \$1 billion less than educators say they need.

And so begins the annual budget dance.

It's the one where the governor makes a proposal, school districts figure out what it means and appeal to state legislators for more funding, and the final agreement is revealed nearly three months later in the flurry of budget bills on deadline.

In between, there are breakfasts with state legislators, rallies in school auditoriums and cafeterias, bus and train trips to Albany to lobby for more money, editorials and appeals, and, finally, three men in a room in the State Capitol making the final decisions.

In his State of the State address, the governor said he would increase education aid by \$2.1 billion over the next two years, including fully restoring the funding known as the Gap Elimination Adjustment, or GEA, which is funding taken away from school districts to help close the state's deficit six years ago. The state has slowly been adding it back.

Under the details of the governor's proposal for the 2016-17 school year, aid would increase by \$991 million, or 4.3 percent, to a total of \$24.2 billion. Of that, \$189 million is slated for the restoration of the GEA. That's less than half of the \$434 million that it would take to eliminate the GEA.

"Anemic" is how Richard Timbs, executive director of the Statewide School Financial Consortium, described Cuomo's proposal. It also displays a lack of understanding about what school districts do, he said.

"It's going to be insufficient," he said, noting that the Board of Regents "thoughtfully recommended" \$2.4 billion to maintain the status quo.

Last year, school districts were left scrambling on their budgets because they did not know how much aid the governor was proposing. For the first time, he did not release, with his executive budget, "school runs," the proposed amount of aid that each district would receive.

While the governor's numbers are an estimate, they are a starting point for districts creating next year's budget. Many administrators surmise they won't receive much less than the governor's proposal, and probably can count on the Legislature adding more funding.

State officials were expected to release the runs based on the governor's proposal. If individual districts don't know how much state revenue they can count on, it's difficult to decide whether or how much to raise taxes or trim spending.

This year's tax cap is expected to be nearly zero, meaning that most districts would not be able to increase taxes without 60 percent of voters agreeing to it.

A video before the governor spoke called the tax cap a "smashing success."

Superintendents and school boards say that no one wants to raise taxes. If districts can't increase tax revenue, they will be more reliant on state aid, Timbs said. Even wealthier districts won't be able to raise taxes much with such a low tax cap and will be looking for more aid, he said.

The State Senate has committed to eliminating the GEA, and legislators from both houses are interested in education aid.

"Education is a major component of our budget, and I welcome the governor's proposed education funding increase," said Assemblyman Sean M. Ryan, D-Buffalo. "However, I think we need to go even further."

So the governor's numbers are a good start for districts. "As we all know, when you get the Legislature into the mix, that initial proposal changes," Hamburg Superintendent Michael R. Cornell said, adding that the ultimate outcome is something that may not be known for 11 weeks.

"It kind of hog ties us," West Seneca Superintendent Mark J. Crawford said of the budget process. "There is nothing we can do until we finally get the accurate and final budget run."

Cornell said that with unpredictable aid, it is difficult to plan budgets several years in advance.

"This is the initial proposal. We don't know quite what it will end up," he said. "We'll know when we know."

Timbs said that Cuomo's proposals "are anemic at best. We're willing to start there."

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