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Pauline Liu: Brace yourself for chaos in school funding season

Brace yourselves.

If ever there was a mantra in the world of public education, that would be it: "Brace yourselves."

As budget season approaches, the nearly 700 school districts across the state are dreading a possible repeat of last year's chaos.

You might remember, that's when Gov. Andrew Cuomo refused to release the state aid runs.

This data gives districts an idea of how much state funding they're likely to receive.

Cuomo turned the information into a political pawn and tried to bully lawmakers into compliance.

He withheld the release of the state aid runs until his education reforms were passed with the new budget on April 1.

Normally, districts receive their state funding projections by late January.

"What happened with the state aid runs was ridiculous last year," said Tim Kremer, executive director of the New York State School Boards Association, speaking at a Fair Funding for Our Schools event in at Monroe-Woodbury High School in Central Valley last week.

"The governor is basically using the budget as a hammer," he added.

It seemed that the governor lost sight of the fact that state aid runs need to be released early for the sake of the children.

Districts need time to decide if they can keep programs for students and maintain staffing levels while struggling to keep property taxes in line.

Instead, they were forced last year to rush their budgets in order to have them ready for public vote in May, as required by law.

Just as he did last year, Cuomo will break with tradition when he presents his spending plan next week.

Instead of giving separate State of the State and budget addresses, he is combining them again.

He has scheduled his presentation for Jan. 13.

In an effort to avert another crisis for districts, the Statewide School Finance Consortium is calling on Cuomo to release the state aid runs as soon as he wraps up his speech next week.

"The governor knows he has a responsibility to help and not hinder the development of school district budgets," said Rick Timbs, executive director of the group, which represents more than 400 districts.

Aides for Cuomo said they don't know when the governor plans to release the state aid runs.

Either way, this spring promises to be full of challenges as the state begins to overhaul the Common Core learning standards as recently recommended by the governor's Common Core Task Force.

According to Sparrow Tobin, a middle school teacher in the Washingtonville School District, teachers have already been faced with so many education reforms "that they're getting whiplash."

Tobin spoke on behalf of the New York State United Teachers union at last week's Fair Funding event, entitled "Who's Driving the Bus?"

The answer: Parents and districts, not politicians.

pliu@th-record.com