

Analysis of the 2015 Budget

Tens of thousands of New Yorkers engaged in a fierce battle against Governor Cuomo's outright attack on public education. Cuomo was backed in his efforts by a handful of billionaire hedge fund managers who are promoting a privatization and test and punish agenda for our schools. On some important issues, with the support of the State Assembly Majority, our students and communities won, on others we suffered significant setbacks for students, teachers, and schools.

The State Senate Majority, backed by the same hedge fund cabal, was closely aligned with Governor Cuomo on many of his efforts. In January Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos said he saw "giving the governor more control of education as appropriate." When talking specifically about teacher evaluations, Skelos made it very clear that the Senate was standing with the Governor: "We want to make sure it's strong and it means something. The Assembly is, unfortunately, trying to water it down." The Senate also stood with the Governor on diverting money from public schools to private schools through an education tax credit, on more funding for privately run charter schools and on increasing the number of these publicly funded, privately run schools in New York State.

This year's budget fight is not the end of the road, the well-financed attacks on public education will continue and our demand for high-quality education for all students without regard to race, income and zip code is far from over. AQE has been at the forefront of the fight for educational quality and opportunity for all students for a long time. Please take the time to read our evaluation of the 2015-16 New York State budget.

Strong Grassroots Movement

- *We saw a strong grassroots movement explode across New York State. It unified parents who have been organizing for racial and economic justice in school funding with the rapidly growing parent-led opt out movement, and teachers and their unions focused on protecting the integrity of their profession and educating our children. This may be the most important outcome of this budget fight.*

Fair and Adequate Funding

- *\$1.6 Billion in school funding, including \$1.3 billion in direct formula aid to schools is significant. The amount of the school funding is a major victory and substantially more than Governor Cuomo proposed although it does not meet*

the standards necessary to make real progress on the Campaign for Fiscal Equity.

- *Preliminary analysis shows that funding prioritized high need schools.* Stay tuned for more detail.

\$75 Million to Improve Struggling Schools

- *Tremendous opportunity to win lasting improvements without state takeover.* We won \$75 million for local school districts to invest in 27 struggling schools. These funds will convert these schools into community schools with health and social services, improve curricula, provide a longer school day or school year, keep students in school through reduced suspensions and increased attendance, and more. We must organize in these schools and make sure these plans work.

- *Partial victory on state takeover.* The Governor proposed a state takeover for 178 struggling schools and for entire school districts without proposing any resources for improvement. The State Assembly fought back on this issue. Provisions for state takeover of districts were defeated. Options for state takeover of schools were delayed for one or two years depending on the school during which time local districts will have the opportunity to make needed improvements. After one or two years there is a provision for appointment of a receiver to run the school, but this appointment is made by the school district, rather than being made by the state. It is troubling that the Governor succeeded in labeling these schools as “failing,” which undermines schools and students and that the receiver, if appointed, will have too many powers. The Board of Regents has considerable power over what happens to these schools and we must organize to make sure this program works to benefit students, schools and communities.

Teacher Evaluations

- *The teacher evaluation system is the most troubling part of the reforms that were enacted.* While the Governor did not get exactly what he wanted, the role of standardized testing in evaluations is given equal weight to the role of observations. This will mean more teaching to the test and more stress for students, teachers and schools, which will have damaging consequences for students. The law is very prescriptive, but the Regents have some say over the implementation of the evaluations. AQE is going to stay on top of these issues and work to get both the Regents and the legislature to take the action needed to get a fair teacher evaluation system.

Pre-Kindergarten

- *A small but important victory.* We won \$30 million for pre-K for upstate and

suburban New York. We have a long way to go to get to universal pre-K, but our work led to a step in the right direction.

Private School Tax Credit

- *A Major Victory.* The proposal by the Governor and the State Senate Majority to divert \$100 million to \$300 million away from public schools and into the pockets of private school donors was defeated thanks to the State Assembly Majority. We need to stay vigilant on this issue.

Privately Run Charter Schools

- *Public Funding for Charters.* While regularly starving our public schools, Governor Cuomo and the Senate Majority sought to increase tuition payments for privately run charter schools. This was defeated in this budget.
- *However, Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos announced that the Senate Majority had secured \$25 million in bullet aid for charter schools.* This is one time, not ongoing, funding. But it raises a serious concern about why the Republican Senators would prioritize privately run charter schools, primarily in New York City, over public schools in their own district. This bullet aid still needs to be distributed and people in these Senate districts should advocate with their Senator that the money goes to local public schools, not privately run New York City charter schools.

Charter Cap Fight Delayed

- *Governor Cuomo tried to force through a major growth in the number of charter schools.* The fight over raising the cap on privately run charter schools was delayed and will be part of the legislative debate between now and June.

DREAM Act

- *Senate Republicans and their Hedge Fund Allies Block Educational Justice.* The Senate Republicans were put in power by the same billionaires who are promoting Governor Cuomo's anti-public education agenda. These Senators ran for office on an immigrant bashing agenda and they stood as a blockade to winning the DREAM Act which is a vital civil rights and educational opportunity issue for immigrant students.

What needs to happen next

- *We need to continue building the movement.* As our movement grapples with working across issue areas – from fair funding to testing – we must grapple with working effectively together across the lines of race, class and geography. For too long, too many students in high-poverty communities, many of which are communities of color, have been in schools that are under

resourced. While high stakes testing is an assault on these communities and their schools, there are many other issues that are also priorities for parents and students in these communities.

- *We need to hold all our elected officials accountable and we need to recognize that many fought side by side with us.* Without the support of the Assembly Majority we would have seen major giveaway of tax dollars to private schools and privately run charter schools. We would have seen an instant state takeover of struggling schools with little or no investment in those schools. And we would have seen a wholly inadequate investment in school funding with no emphasis on equity. We need to work with the Assembly to hold the Regents accountable on struggling schools and we need to demand that the entire legislature changes the teacher evaluation system to a system that makes sense for students, teachers and schools.
- *This budget fight was politically damaging to the Governor.* His education proposals were wildly unpopular and the public strongly rejected them by a 63% to 28% margin. His overall popularity dropped as a result. We need to keep the spotlight on him and make sure that all politicians understand that standing up for the Governor's agenda is not only bad policy, it is bad politics.
- *AQE played a major role in the Hedge Clippers Campaign that raised public awareness that a small cabal of super wealthy billionaires are behind the attacks on public education championed by Governor Cuomo.* We have to continue to put the pressure on these hedge fund billionaires who have spent \$39.6 million in New York on lobbying and campaign donations to push their anti-equity, anti-public school, pro-testing agenda.