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Parents, students protest Contracts for Excellence

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ALBANY - Following complaints from parents and education advocates, and a call to the police, the state Board of Regents leaders promised yesterday to reject school accountability plans known as Contracts for Excellence unless districts follow the rules for public input and disclosure.

This is the second year of the Contracts for Excellence, in which districts that have at least one low-performing school and get an increase in state funding of 10 percent or more receive additional money to help improve student achievement.

Glenny Williams of Rochester, a member of the Alliance for Quality Education, said his district has "fallen short" in complying with the CFE, particularly in providing the public with information about the contracts so people can offer meaningful comments.

"We really know that you did a good job getting us this large amount of money and we don't want to waste it," Williams, 60, told the Board of Regents. "We want it spent on moving our kids from where they are to better, to close those (achievement) gaps, to make education work."

Williams was one of about 100 people who participated in a rally outside the state Education Department. The group, which included members of the Alliance, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity and other organizations, tried to attend a Board of Regents' meeting to speak about the contracts. They were accused of disrupting the meeting, and the Education Department called police. The Regents ultimately permitted a small group, including Williams, to speak.

Williams said Rochester schools didn't notify parents that the purpose of a hearing in the spring was to get input on the contracts. The district held a second hearing this month, but advocates want more information about its plans, he said.

A spokesman for Rochester schools could not immediately be reached for comment yesterday.

Board of Regents Chancellor Robert Bennett said the panel would "do the right thing" on the contracts. "We do hear you. We want to continue to hear from you. You represent the most important group in the whole enterprise and that's your kids," he said.

There are 39 CFE districts in 2008-09, down from 55 last year. The Big 5 city school systems - New York City, Rochester, Yonkers, Buffalo and Syracuse - and other high-poverty, urban areas are among them. The Contracts for Excellence are part of the largest increase in education funding in state history, an attempt to correct inequity after a protracted legal battle that focused on school funding for New York City children.

In a report released yesterday, the Alliance for Quality Education said most CFE districts were not following requirements for public input and disclosure. Findings include:

- Only eight school districts held a public hearing and provided adequate detail on contract programs.
- Fourteen districts held or scheduled a public hearing and sought comment but did not provide enough detail on either Contracts for Excellence Programs or allocations by school and program or both.
- Three districts provided some public information, but they have not held or scheduled a public hearing as of July 21.
- Six school districts held a public hearing but did not provide any information to the public about the content of the contract.
- Eight school districts provided no information on their contract and did not hold or schedule a public hearing as of July 21.

Eight districts provided enough detail on the contracts before the public hearing so people could comment in a meaningful way, according to the report. They include Elmira; Yonkers; Odessa-Montour, Schuyler County; and Wappingers Falls, Dutchess County.

School boards must submit their contracts by Aug. 15. As of yesterday, 20 of the 39 districts had satisfied the requirements for public input, said Johanna Duncan-Poitier, a deputy education commissioner.

"We will not be submitting any Contracts for Excellence to the (education) commissioner until the public-comment process ... has been followed," she said.

Districts have to spend CFE money on programs that have been proved to improve student performance, such as smaller class sizes, and funds must be targeted to the neediest students.

The state School Boards Association was not aware before yesterday that there was concern over a lack of public input on the contracts, spokesman David Albert said. Because of the timing of the new program, districts were rushed in getting the contracts off the ground last year. This is the first year districts are developing a full public process, he said.