

Regents heed calls for input
In face of protests, board calls for hearings on school improvement "contracts"

By **RICK KARLIN**, Capitol bureau

Click byline for more stories by writer.

First published: Tuesday, July 29, 2008

ALBANY -- After a brief protest march that came complete with a call to the police, members of the state Board of Regents on Monday pledged to hold off approving their Contracts for Excellence in targeted school districts until those districts make allowances for public input.

"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," Regents Chancellor Robert Bennett said after members of a school funding group, the Alliance for Quality Education, came to the Regents meeting.

The group's complaint: Too many Contracts for Excellence schools were forging ahead with state-funded improvement plans without adequate public hearings or other outreach to parents.

Bennett's remarks came after an initial protest in which AQE members were asked to leave the Regents meeting room because there wasn't enough space. About 100 protesters traveled from across the state for Monday's meeting, said Nikki Jones, an AQE spokeswoman.

"If parents don't have the information, they can't comment," Jones said as protesters chanted "Our voices count!" outside the state Education Department building.

The program lays out fairly specific strategies schools must use to improve and therefore earn the additional funding. But AQE's findings suggested only eight of 39 affected districts held a timely hearing or provided adequate detail on their plans.

School districts in this year's contract include Albany, Amsterdam, Gloversville, Schenectady and South Colonie.

Rick Karlin can be reached at 454-5758 or by e-mail at rkarlin@timesunion.com. Gannett News Service contributed to this report.