

A primer on aid delays

Numbers in district-by-district list of school aid delays vary greatly

By [SCOTT WALDMAN](#), Staff writer

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ALBANY -- New York's current cash-flow crisis landed another blow Tuesday when the state Budget Division released its list of delayed December aid payments for school districts.

Some education advocates have promised to fight Gov. David Paterson's action with a lawsuit, which could be filed as early as today. Others are wondering if the held-back money will ever arrive.

Because of the quirks of districts' payment schedules, the delayed sums -- a 10 percent trim on what each district was expecting -- vary wildly across the Capital Region, from \$744,643 for Albany to a relatively small \$29,032 from Schenectady's budget. Bethlehem's aid is being reduced by \$104,676, and Shenendehowa schools are losing out on \$182,197.

If the delay turns into a permanent cut, the unusual midyear hit could result in anything from the elimination of field trips to layoffs.

Paterson announced the broad outlines of the delays on Sunday, including the holding back of 10 percent of the scheduled Dec. 15 payments for Aid and Incentives to Municipalities, county social services reimbursements and school aid. Many community leaders are hoping to see the withheld dollars handed out in the weeks ahead if the state's coffers are replenished by revenue -- perhaps derived from end-of-the-year Wall Street bonuses.

Education advocates aren't willing to wait for good news. New York State United Teachers has formed a coalition of groups -- including the New York State Council of Superintendents, the New York State School Boards Association and the Campaign for Fiscal Equity -- to explore the option of taking the governor to court.

"Education groups are looking to protect school districts and schoolchildren from the harm these cuts would cause," NYSUT spokesman Carl Korn said.

Paterson has not said when, or if, the payments will be made. Earlier this month, he and the Legislature agreed on a package that closed \$2.7 billion of the estimated \$3.2 billion deficit for the current fiscal year -- an action the governor has been blasting as insufficient and craven. In response, he has unilaterally decided to withhold certification of certain state payments, at least until the state's immediate cash flow crisis has abated.

Paterson appears to be trying to ram through aid cuts disguised as delays, said Billy Easton of the Alliance for Quality Education, a union-affiliated group that advocates for school spending.

"The lack of forthrightness and transparency about whether (the reductions) are cuts or will be paid is sowing chaos in school districts," Easton said.

Locally, the Albany school district saw the biggest cut, dropping its expected amount from \$7,446,427 to \$6,701,784. Interim superintendent Raymond Colucciello said the district is already preparing for less state money by trimming up to seven positions before the end of the year (eight were cut in October). The district is considering the elimination of another 100 positions before next fall. A new food service vendor will take over next month, saving the district \$600,000. All nonessential spending will be frozen.

"In addition to planning for possible midyear revenue reductions," he said in a statement, "we continue to look at all options for next year and beyond to balance our mission to provide the best possible academic and extracurricular programs for all of our students with our responsibility to our city's taxpayers."

The Troy City School District saw its Dec. 15 aid payment of \$3,624,016 reduced by \$362,402 to \$3,261,614. As in Albany, the district anticipated the cuts and expects they will not affect its educational and sports programs. It is, however, taking a close look at pruning back professional development, field trips and seminars.

"We're in the same situation every other district in the state is in," said Caroline Boardman, a district spokeswoman.

Additional payments slated to be made later in the month could suffer another trim by the state. The certifications for those expenditures -- including a \$2.3 billion payment for the STAR program -- could be reduced by roughly 19 percent. This higher percentage, the governor's office noted in Sunday's news release, reflects "the significant uncertainties related to cash availability at the end of the month due to risks associated with potential receipts volatility."

Schenectady School Superintendent Eric Ely said the proposed STAR payment reduction would mean \$1.6 million less in the district's coffers -- a gap that would likely result in borrowing. The interest cost could eventually be passed down to the taxpayer.

The district, which got off easy in this round of reductions, simply wouldn't be able to cut back to make up that kind of difference, Ely said. Schenectady's voters approved the district's current spending plan eight months ago.

Scott Waldman can be reached at 454-5080 or swaldman@timesunion.com. Kenneth C. Crowe II, Casey Seiler and Lauren Stanforth contributed to this story.

The state school aid payment delay amounts vary wildly around the Capital Region. For other districts, see page A10.

Albany: \$744,643

Bethlehem: \$104,676

East Greenbush: \$131,940

Saratoga Springs: \$155,763

Schenectady: \$29,032

Shenendehowa: \$182,197

South Colonie: \$88,058

Troy: \$362,402

Source: Budget Division

District delays

Here are more school aid payment delay amounts for districts around the Capital Region:

Amsterdam: \$11,438

Averill Park: \$8,236

Ballston Spa: \$120,560

Berne-Knox: \$57,832

Canajoharie: \$31,342

Chatham: \$39,434

Cohoes: \$155,781

Coxsackie-Athens: \$27,318

Duanesburg: \$31,764

Glens Falls: \$82,970

Glens Falls Common: \$6,684

Gloversville: \$307,350
Green Island: \$3,008
Greenwich: \$55,241
Hoosick Falls: \$83,543
Hudson: \$69,581
Jericho: \$35,137
Kinderhook: \$62,352
Lake George: \$16,509
Lansingburgh: \$172,030
Menands: \$3,295
Niskayuna: \$68,434
North Colonie: \$61,712
Pine Bush: \$329,995
Queensbury: \$83,929
Rensselaer: \$90,491
Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk: \$90,820
South Glens Falls: \$134,346
Schodack: \$38,356
Schoharie: \$82,376
Scotia-Glenville: \$95,064
Voorheesville: \$22,434
Watervliet: \$126,720
Wynantskill: \$13,757

Source: Budget Division