

Cuomo Fails Public Schools

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As nearly 50 million students return to public school classrooms across the country this month, most of them will find larger class sizes, less music and arts, reductions in college preparatory Advanced Placement classes, cuts in the numbers of guidance counselors and librarians. In all, thirty-four states have cut public school budgets.

Republicans like Wisconsin's Scott Walker and Michigan's Rick Snyder have been lightning rods for progressive organizing in response to Tea Party–inspired budgets, which slash social spending while letting corporations and the wealthy off the hook. But are Democrats getting a pass on the same policies?

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, already being hailed as a potential Democratic presidential front-runner for 2016, wants to position himself as a progressive leader. In his sweeping State of the State address earlier this year, he declared that he was going to restore New York's great progressive tradition.

But his budget is hard to distinguish from Walker's or Snyder's. He rammed through \$1.3 billion in school cuts and a roughly \$4.5 billion tax cut for the wealthiest 3 percent of New Yorkers—a plan praised by the state's Tea Party leadership. As a result, more than 10,000 educator jobs were eliminated from schools, along with cuts in arts, sports, music, Advanced Placement, pre-kindergarten, and career and technology courses.

Though Cuomo campaigned on a pledge to take from rich school districts and give to the poor, his cuts per pupil were actually twice as large in poor districts as in wealthy ones. He gutted New York's commitment to the Campaign for Fiscal Equity—plaintiff in the landmark school-funding lawsuit that had led to a commitment to invest \$5.5 billion to close the funding gulf between rich and poor classrooms.

While starving schools from above, Cuomo is also choking off local funding by instituting a property tax cap. In California such a cap, enacted via Proposition 13, caused that state's schools to plummet from among the best in the nation to among the worst. The cap, like the Cuomo funding cuts, will increase existing educational inequities and reduce students' opportunity to

learn. This is why it is so hard to square the word “progressive” with Cuomo’s budget, much less with the governor himself—same-sex marriage success notwithstanding.

Setting the stage for Cuomo’s agenda has been a growing movement of “market based” school reformers. The wind is at their backs thanks to Education Secretary Arne Duncan’s Race to the Top and Davis Guggenheim’s one-sided film *Waiting for Superman*. Groups like Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) and Stand for Children, representing hedge-fund managers, venture capitalists and private equity investors, provide campaign cash to Democrats nationwide. This enables Democrats like Cuomo to slash funding for schools in poor communities and cash in on political contributions while wrapping themselves in the mantle of “progressive school reform.” DFER, which now has branches in ten states, pumped \$17 million into political and advocacy campaigns in its first three years—giving momentum to its agenda and providing Democrats with a new source of funds as an alternative to the teachers unions.

The group’s reform platform includes a heavy emphasis on test scores, replacing public schools with privately run charter schools, top-down school closings and pay for performance. The market reformers also want government to help expand the role of educational entrepreneurs.

Governor Cuomo’s crowning achievement, by DFER’s estimate, was to increase the role of standardized test scores in teacher evaluations (a policy that a state court has since overturned). As with many of the changes promoted by market reformers, there is scant research to justify the use of test scores to evaluate teachers—in fact, pay-for-test-score performance was shown to be a failure by a 2010 study by Vanderbilt University. Cuomo’s next proposal is to force school districts to compete with one another for scarce resources—ensuring that some students are winners while others are losers. It makes a catchy sound bite, but it runs counter to what is being done in nations like Finland, Japan, Singapore and our neighbor Canada, all of which are international leaders in educational outcomes. In these countries they value teachers, promote and fund equity, and ensure all students access to a high-quality curriculum.

The Cuomo cuts were enacted despite vigorous opposition by community organizations and teachers unions, which collaborated to organize dozens of rallies, press events and grassroots lobbying efforts. As the cuts hit classrooms this fall, these same groups are planning a barrage of actions to focus the public’s attention on how the cuts are affecting students. Ultimately, progressive education activists in New York and across the country will have to translate this into electoral action in 2012’s state legislative elections and beyond in order to demonstrate that school cuts have political consequences. Forging a unified approach to fighting budget cuts is a first step; taking on the larger frame of “market reforms” is a bigger challenge. One key opportunity will present itself in 2013, when New York City elects a new mayor and the legacy of Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s nationally touted market reforms of schools will be a central issue.

The Tea Party threat is real, but the future of our public education system could rest in the hands of Democrats like Cuomo. It’s time to remind them, and their constituents, what the word “progressive” means.