

MYTH VS. REALITY:

Gov. Cuomo's anti-public education propaganda

Cuomo says the “cry that more money will solve the problem is false.”

The reality: Money is desperately needed to provide what all kids need. Half of the state's school districts today are getting less state aid than in 2008. The Comptroller's Office reports that 90 school districts — more than 13 percent of districts statewide — are designated as “fiscally stressed” (<http://www.osc.state.ny.us/press/releases/jan15/012915.htm>) (January 2015) The governor's claim that the state has “the highest per pupil spending in the nation” is also false. Education Week reports that New York is in fact fourth when adjusted for regional costs. Meanwhile, the governor's cherry-picked statistics also ignore the reality that New York state excels in multiple measures of educational achievement and progress, including a steadily improving graduation rate.

Cuomo says: “Education should be the Great Equalizer.”

The reality: It certainly isn't an equalizer in the governor's budget. New York is one of the worst states in the nation when it comes to unequal funding between rich and poor districts. Schools in poorer districts spent \$8,733 per pupil less than those from wealthier ones, an inequity that has grown by nearly 9 percent since Andrew Cuomo took office.

Cuomo says our schools are falling behind.

The reality: While the governor likes to selectively cite from the grade 3-8 state assessments, the truth is those scores dropped only after the State Education Department imposed Common Core assessments before students were exposed to the new curriculum. Despite the governor's negative view, New York's graduation rates are steadily improving; the rate of students going to college is climbing; and New York students are excelling on numerous national fronts such as Advanced Placement exams and the prestigious Intel science research contest.

Cuomo says the state must take over “failing” schools.

The reality: It takes a community effort to turn around a struggling school. The governor's proposals would centralize power over public education and strip away local control from the community and parents. If a school “fails” for three years, Cuomo wants to place it under “receivership,” overriding collective bargaining agreements and firing teachers. The track record for state takeovers of schools is dismal. Our public schools are democratically governed by locally elected school boards directly accountable to voters — and the state should help local communities by providing the funding all kids need to succeed.

Cuomo says he wants to reduce over-testing.

The reality: His budget would do just the opposite — more than doubling the weight of state standardized tests in teacher evaluations and ratcheting up test prep pressure on students. He ignores research on how tests should be used to improve student learning. His “test-and-punish” education plan calls for state takeover of struggling neighborhood schools, closing teacher preparation programs and tying new teachers' fates to high-stakes standardized tests.

Cuomo says the state must take total control of teacher evaluations.

The reality: Rather than Cuomo's punitive system that would usurp local control, we need a system that strengthens teaching and learning. By state law, teacher evaluations are negotiated at the local level, with 20 percent based on state testing. Cuomo is pushing a one-size-fits-all evaluation system, with 50 percent based on state test scores — a punishing plan unsupported by research. He also wants to mandate regular teacher observations be done by an “outside” observer, adding bureaucracy, increasing costs and eroding a community's role in evaluating teachers. This shows a breathtaking lack of respect for local communities as well as educators. His oft-repeated remark that the goal of evaluations should be to find 10 percent of teachers ineffective means that regardless of teachers' achievement and ability, their scores would be cooked by the state to ensure an epic fail.

Cuomo says it's too easy for teachers to get tenure.

The reality: New York state is widely recognized for its exemplary teaching force and has earned high marks for its rigorous standards and credentialing requirements — typically ranking among the nation's top 10. Teachers are required to earn a four-year degree, succeed at practice teaching, pass multiple exams and serve in a district satisfactorily for a minimum of three years — in a probationary period that can be extended to four years — before even becoming eligible to earn tenure. Tenure decisions are made at the local level, recommended by the superintendent and approved by the local school board. Thousands are counseled out of teaching before even becoming eligible to earn this due process right.

With no evidence to justify the practice, Cuomo wants to extend probation to five years and mandate that teachers' ratings would be dependent on state tests, a move that would effectively undercut local community decision-making about its teaching corps. This punishing proposal flies in the face of a growing body of independent research on evaluations (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/04/13/statisticians-slam-popular-teacher-evaluation-method/>) and comes at a time when a groundswell of states is moving away from the discredited use of state test scores for high-stakes decisions. (<http://ny.chalkbeat.org/2015/01/29/gov-cuomos-big-fix-for-evaluations-bucks-national-trend/>) This unsupported plan would have a chilling effect on what should be New York state's high priority of recruiting and retaining great teachers.

Cuomo says it's impossible to get rid of bad teachers.

The reality: That's wrong. In New York state, teacher-supported reforms have made the discipline process faster and more cost efficient, with 80 percent of cases resolved before going to a hearing. The remainder are typically resolved within five months. The improved tenure law means swifter consequences for anyone who violates public trust. And when school districts misuse the law or bring baseless charges, innocent teachers are being returned to the classroom more swiftly.

Teacher-supported changes to the law in 2008 mean any teacher, tenured or not, will automatically lose both job and teaching license if guilty of certain sexual offenses, without recourse to a hearing. In practice, educators are immediately removed from the classroom whenever sexual offense charges are lodged.

Cuomo says the charter cap must be lifted.

The reality: Charter schools must be held accountable, not expanded. Charter school operators siphon money from already under-funded regular public schools, while turning away students with special needs as well as English language learners. And there is no evidence that charter schools outperform regular public schools.

Cuomo says “competition” will build up public higher education.

The reality: Public higher education stands for student access and intellectual freedom. The governor's plan would force campuses and professors to compete against one another in a “Hunger games” designed to ensure losers. State aid would be based on “performance targets” rather than enrollment. Professors who “generate the most impactful research and commercialization opportunities” would get bonuses. For community colleges, the governor's plan of specialization by region would narrow opportunities and deny access to local students.

Cuomo says we need an education tax credit.

The reality: No one benefits from this plan except a handful of the super rich and the schools they support. Let's call it what it is: a backdoor voucher that would significantly benefit privates and charters. It's nothing more than a tax loophole allowing a wealthy person to write a check and get a tax credit up to \$1 million.



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