

School districts assail Pataki's proposed budget

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ADVANCE ALBANY BUREAU

ALBANY — Members of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts brought their case to the state Capitol yesterday, charging Gov. George E. Pataki with "slashing and burning" the state education budget. They asked the state Legislature to restore the money, but legislative leaders expressed doubt that budget will even be passed on time.

Jerry Cammarata, the Staten Island representative to the city Board of Education, is vice chairman of the Conference and joined the group in Albany for its presentation.

"Any cuts that happen to the city as a whole will happen to the Island proportionally," said Cammarata, who will head the Conference next year. "It leaves it up to the local superintendents to redefine what the districts will do with what money they do receive. It will mean taking from one program to benefit another. ... This budget just flies in the face of what parents expect and what they frankly deserve to have."

The Big 5 is composed of the school districts of New York City, Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse and Yonkers.

The group called for restorations in funding to Universal Pre-Kindergarten (\$100 million), Early Grade Class Size Reduction (\$75 million), Minor Maintenance (\$50 million), Big 5 Professional Development (\$10 million), Instructional Computer Technology Aid (\$25 million) and Library Materials (\$6.00 per pupil).

Pataki eliminated individual budget lines for several of the programs and combined them into block grants for funding for Pre-K, class reduction and maintenance.

The governor's office maintains this approach will allow more districts to apply for the funding without being subject to strict requirements.

The Conference also called for a state-supported school capital program and said payment of prior year education-aid claims to the cities need to be increased.

City officials, including Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew, claim the state owes the city \$730 million in back payments, money, they say, that would be put toward making capital improvements to school buildings.

The governor has set aside just \$16 million — or 2 percent — of that total to go to the city this year.

Pataki said that since he's been in office, the state has paid its debts to the city on time. He said the rest of the debt, which is more than a decade old, is based on the very numbers he's investigating as part of a probe of the School Construction Authority and school enrollment figures. Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno (R-Rensselaer County) said problems with the education budget are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to difficulties with this year's budget negotiations.

"I hope that we're going to have an on-time budget, but the process is a little bit difficult right now based on the governor's submission of the appropriation bill, putting language in it that some people feel may be unconstitutional," Bruno said. "We have a response to that and one of the other hurdles will be to see if we can agree, three ways, on the available funds. And if we can't agree on the available funds, then we're going to have trouble instituting the conference committees to progress with the budget."

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Manhattan) said the governor's wording is going to be problematic.

"It's going to be a problem and we're going to need to make restorations that are necessary in order to restore education funding," Silver said. "He obviously submitted [the budget] unconstitutionally. He tries to make permanent changes in law. The procedure is going to be a cumbersome procedure in of the budget today, saying Pataki's proposal would be a hard hit to education."

"Essentially, this budget would renege on the commitment made order to overcome that, but I hope we can do that in a timely fashion."

State Comptroller H. Carl McCall released his own analysis to school districts last year," McCall said. "Education has to be a commitment the state actually lives up to. We can't back out of a promise to our schoolchildren."

If the Legislature does not pass a budget on April 1, it will mark the 14th straight year they failed to have a measure in place on time. A new twist will be that lawmakers will have their salaries withheld until a budget is passed, including the 38 percent pay hike they voted themselves last December.