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## Education Pork Flows Toward Political Allies

*Senate and Assembly will decide where the money goes*

By Chris Bragg

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Through measures inserted into the state budget this spring, both the Assembly and state Senate are now set to dole out millions of extra dollars to schools — outside the state's normal education funding process.

But the distribution of so-called "bullet aid" funds, derided by critics as a type of pork-barrel spending, is not flowing along geographic lines. Most of the funds controlled by the Assembly — a chamber dominated by New York City Democrats — is set to go upstate, and much of the money directed by the state Senate — controlled by Republicans from Long Island and upstate — appears headed to New York City.

One potential explanation: Assembly members are close to the powerful New York State United Teachers union, whose allies support their plan, and Senate Republicans have gotten millions in outside campaign spending help from supporters of charter schools, which are clustered in New York City.

The two pots of money, controlled respectively by Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie of the Bronx and Senate Majority Leader John Flanagan of Long Island, were approved as "lump sums" in the state budget passed this spring. But they still must be doled out to specific school districts and approved in separate one-house resolutions as the legislative session nears its end.

Late last week, the state Assembly introduced its resolution laying out where exactly its more than \$14 million would go. The plan has since gotten a thumbs-up from the Alliance for Quality Education, a group that advocates for increased public school spending that gets financial backing from the statewide teachers union. None of the Assembly's money is going to charter schools, according to AQE's Executive Director Billy Easton; instead, major grants are headed to big, high-need school districts, including \$1.2 million to three Buffalo districts, and \$1 million to Poughkeepsie.

The Assembly list also includes \$100,000 for the Albany City School District, and \$75,000 for the Albany Public Library. (In addition to schools, the funds can also go to public libraries and not-for-profit institutions.)

Meanwhile, the state Senate as of Tuesday evening hadn't introduced a resolution stating where more than \$15 million of funds under its control are going, even as a framework agreement had



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been reached on many other session-ending issues. Senate GOP spokesman Scott Reif said its spending resolution would be released once it is "finalized and we are set to act."

But Republicans announced plans earlier this year to use a separate \$25 million pot of bullet aid money for assistance to charter schools, despite the fact that only three members of the Senate Republican conference hail from New York City, where most charters are clustered.

Easton panned the GOP's plan, arguing that it was payback for campaign help. "You would think they would want to give every dollar they can to needy schools they represent, not to charter schools that are overwhelmingly in New York City," Easton said. "This is a case where campaign donations by hedge fund billionaires who are propping up the Senate majority are outweighing the needs of local public schools."

According to Tammy Gamera, senior research associate at the watchdog Citizens Budget Commission, the \$25 million pot of money controlled by Senate Republicans is actually for the 2016-17 school year, while the \$15 million is for the coming school year. She said it was "unusual that the state budget included multiple years of bullet aid for the Senate."