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# Cuomo Drops Plan to Use State Money to Pay for College Classes for Inmates

By THOMAS KAPLAN APRIL 2, 2014

In an important speech at a gathering of black and Latino lawmakers in February, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo unveiled what he billed as a bold plan to attack the problem of high rates of recidivism: The state would pay for college classes for prison inmates.

But six weeks later, after lawmakers approved the state budget this week, the governor acknowledged that his highly promoted proposal, which his advisers talked up as a major advancement in criminal justice policy, was so politically controversial that he would no longer pursue using public money to finance it.

The abrupt decision was a rare political retreat by Mr. Cuomo, a careful student of public opinion polls and legislative sentiment who has generally avoided the kinds of miscalculations about hot-button issues that can easily trip up a chief executive.

At a news conference on Tuesday to celebrate passage of the budget, Mr. Cuomo said he had decided against seeking public money for the prison classes because of opposition from lawmakers, particularly in the State Senate, who pointed out that many law-abiding families are struggling to pay for college.

“I understand the sentiment,” the governor said. “I don’t agree with it, but I understand it, and I understand the appearance of it.”

Mr. Cuomo, a Democrat, had proposed creating publicly-funded college programs at 10 state prisons. His office estimated the program would cost \$1 million in the first year, a minuscule sum in a state whose corrections agency has an operating budget of \$2.8 billion.

College programs in prisons dwindled two decades ago after President Bill Clinton signed legislation denying Pell grants for inmates. Gov. George E. Pataki, a Republican, later made prisoners ineligible for New York's Tuition Assistance Program, cutting off another source of public funding.

New York currently offers college programs in more than a dozen state prisons, funded mostly with private money, though a small amount of public money has been used. Mr. Cuomo wants to create a state program to build upon those offerings so more inmates can participate and earn degrees. A study by the RAND Corporation last year found that inmates who participated in education programs while incarcerated had much lower odds of returning to prison.

"Let's stop this cycle of a society that incarcerates more people than any industrialized nation on the globe," Mr. Cuomo said when he unveiled his proposal.

Mr. Cuomo takes care to choreograph announcements to maximize media coverage and to amass public support, but in this case, the rollout was atypically rocky — Republican lawmakers immediately began ridiculing the idea, and the opposition continued to mount even after the governor's office lined up supporters to endorse it publicly.

At one point, during a stop near Buffalo, Mr. Cuomo was even asked by a reporter what he would say to Yoko Ono if Mark David Chapman, who murdered John Lennon and is imprisoned Western New York, sought a college education. (He did not directly respond.)

In Albany, lawmakers started petitions to collect signatures from constituents who oppose the idea, including one with the title "Hell No to Attica University." The State Senate, which is controlled by Republicans and a group of independent Democrats, included in its draft of the budget a provision that forbade the use of state money to pay for college degree programs in prisons unless inmates pay the full tuition.

The idea provoked outrage in Washington: Three Republican congressmen from upstate New York introduced what they called the Kids Before Cons Act, which would prevent federal money from being used to pay for college classes for federal or state prison inmates.

The proposal also gave fodder to Rob Astorino, the Westchester County executive, who is campaigning to unseat Mr. Cuomo in November. During a recent

visit to Buffalo, Mr. Astorino, a Republican, spoke about how he and his wife were saving to pay for their children to go to college. “Maybe our 10-year-old son, we should sit him down and explain how to rob a bank,” Mr. Astorino said.

A Siena College poll conducted last month found that 53 percent of voters supported the governor’s proposal, compared with 43 percent who opposed it. But the poll found strong opposition among some groups: 68 percent of Republicans, and 66 percent of upstate voters.

A spokesman for Mr. Cuomo, Matt Wing, said on Wednesday that several private donors had expressed interest in providing financial backing for the program the governor had proposed. He said administration officials were considering a plan in which the state corrections department would accept the grants and donations for the program.

Supporters of the program said they found the backlash to be dispiriting.

“For a lot of politicians, it’s just like rolling off a log to demagogue on this issue,” said Robert Gangi, a former executive director of the Correctional Association of New York. “To make claims that we’re soft on crime or coddling prisoners, it’s really a kind of know-nothing politics.”

Assemblyman Daniel J. O’Donnell, a Manhattan Democrat and the chairman of the Correction Committee, said prison superintendents had repeatedly asked him to push to expand the college offerings in their facilities.

“The people who run the prisons want it,” he said. “The prisoners’ lives are improved. The prisons are made safer. So who exactly is opposed to this?”

A version of this article appears in print on April 3, 2014, on page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: Cuomo Drops Plan to Use State Money to Pay for College Classes for Inmates.