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Elia: Education department, Cuomo need to work together



Elia. (AP Photo/Mike Groll)

By KESHIA CLUKEY 5:25 a.m. | Sep. 23, 2015

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ALBANY — State education commissioner MaryEllen Elia said that her agency and Gov. Andrew Cuomo need to be on the same page as the department and a Cuomo-created commission both push to review the Common Core standards and complete their reports before the governor's State of the State message in January.

"I don't think that the work that's being done by the governor's commission excludes the work that's being done by [the state education department], but clearly we need to work together," Elia told POLITICO New York.

In another use of executive action to [advance his education reform](#) agenda, Cuomo earlier this month announced that his education commission also [will do a comprehensive review](#) of the implementation of the Common Core.

Elia, whose department is in the process of making changes to the state's Common Core-aligned exams after a high number of students chose to "opt out" of taking them this year — and whose opposition to the opt-out movement was challenged by Cuomo — said she doesn't think the governor's decision is an overstep.

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"We have a common agenda to support education and the students in the state and I think that's really important," Elia said.

The governor and the education commissioner have not discussed the matter in person,



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because they have yet to meet face to face, more than two months after Elia took over the department.

The commissioner and governor have spoken on the phone, Elia said.

"I've had multiple conversations with the governor. He's been very busy, as have I," she said.

Since Elia's July 6 start date, she has made it a point to travel around the state on a listening tour, speaking with superintendents, teachers and parents. She lives in the Capital Region.

In that time, Cuomo has made it to the Capital Region on at least two occasions, though he spent the majority of August in New York City after his long-term girlfriend, celebrity chef Sandra Lee, [was hospitalized](#) due to complications associated with her double mastectomy in May, according to his public schedule.

Cuomo in the past two months also has made appearances in Utica, Rochester and Puerto Rico, according to his public schedule.

"The governor and his education team have been in continuous contact with Commissioner Elia and her staff since her appointment," Cuomo spokesman Rich Azzopardi said in an emailed response. "Since the invention of the telephone, counting the number of face-to-face meetings has been a less-than-precise measure of anything."

It's a control issue, said former Bronx assemblyman Michael Benjamin, about Cuomo not meeting with Elia.

"The governor wants to do things on his own time table and kind of have her stew a bit before he meets her," he said.

Unlike states where the education commissioner is appointed by the governor, New York's commissioner is appointed by the state Board of Regents, whose members are chosen by the Legislature.

"She is not his choice," Gerald Benjamin, a professor of political science at SUNY New Paltz, said of Elia.

The state education department is one of the only state agencies over which the governor does not have direct control, he said. "The governor's main power over education comes from the fiscal side, from the budgetary process," Benjamin said.

It is in Elia's interest to have a good relationship with Cuomo because of his power over the budget, but Benjamin said it would be "unwise" of the governor to leave Elia out of the discussions on education policy.

According to past schedules available online, Cuomo met with the previous commissioner, John King Jr., three times from 2012 to 2014. It listed a meeting with King along with union leaders in January 2012, a meeting in February 2012 on the topic of teacher evaluations, and another meeting in April 2012 as part of the governor's education commission. The public schedule does not include all meetings.

There might be a benefit to Cuomo's having a positive relationship with Elia, said David Bloomfield, a professor of education leadership at Brooklyn College and at the City University of New York Graduate Center. "If he has confidence in the commissioner he might be less prone to bully [the state education department]," Bloomfield said. "But he should not be allowed to put himself in the position of dictating education policy as if it were a gubernatorial agency."

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