

Preschoolers' families demand bus service

Parents of disabled kids want transportation, not political skirmishes

By CARL CAMPANILE
ADVANCE ALBANY BUREAU

ALBANY — Staten Island parents of disabled preschoolers — left stranded without bus service to get to special education classes — demanded yesterday that Gov. Mario M. Cuomo and lawmakers act to break the transportation stalemate.

Hundreds of angry parents of preschoolers, special education teachers and drivers from New York City converged here in a wave of small yellow school buses to pressure their state representatives to resolve the dispute in bus contracts. Many made their point in chants of nursery rhymes.

"The wheels on the bus go round and round, but not in Cuomo's town. The children in the house say they want to go to school, but not in Cuomo's town," parents chanted.

Bus service to the 3-to-5-year-old special education students was canceled May 1 when transportation contracts between the city Department of Transportation and 27 members of the Pre-School Transportation Alliance of bus companies expired.

The dispute centers on a state law that requires New York City to competitively bid the bus contracts. The city has lost 50 percent state reimbursement for transportation costs over the past three years because it violated the competitive bidding provision. City officials, including Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez, are pushing for legislation that would waive competitive bidding requirements.

But there's a catch: City officials also want the cash-starved state to forgive it for past penalties. In other words, Albany would have to cough up anywhere from \$31 million to \$74 million in funding retroactively to the city.

Cuomo said he still had reservations about such an arrangement. "We're still discussing that," he said during a press briefing.

But parents yesterday said they didn't want to hear about the bureaucratic battling between city and state officials. They want them to settle the matter so their children can be transported to and from classes again.

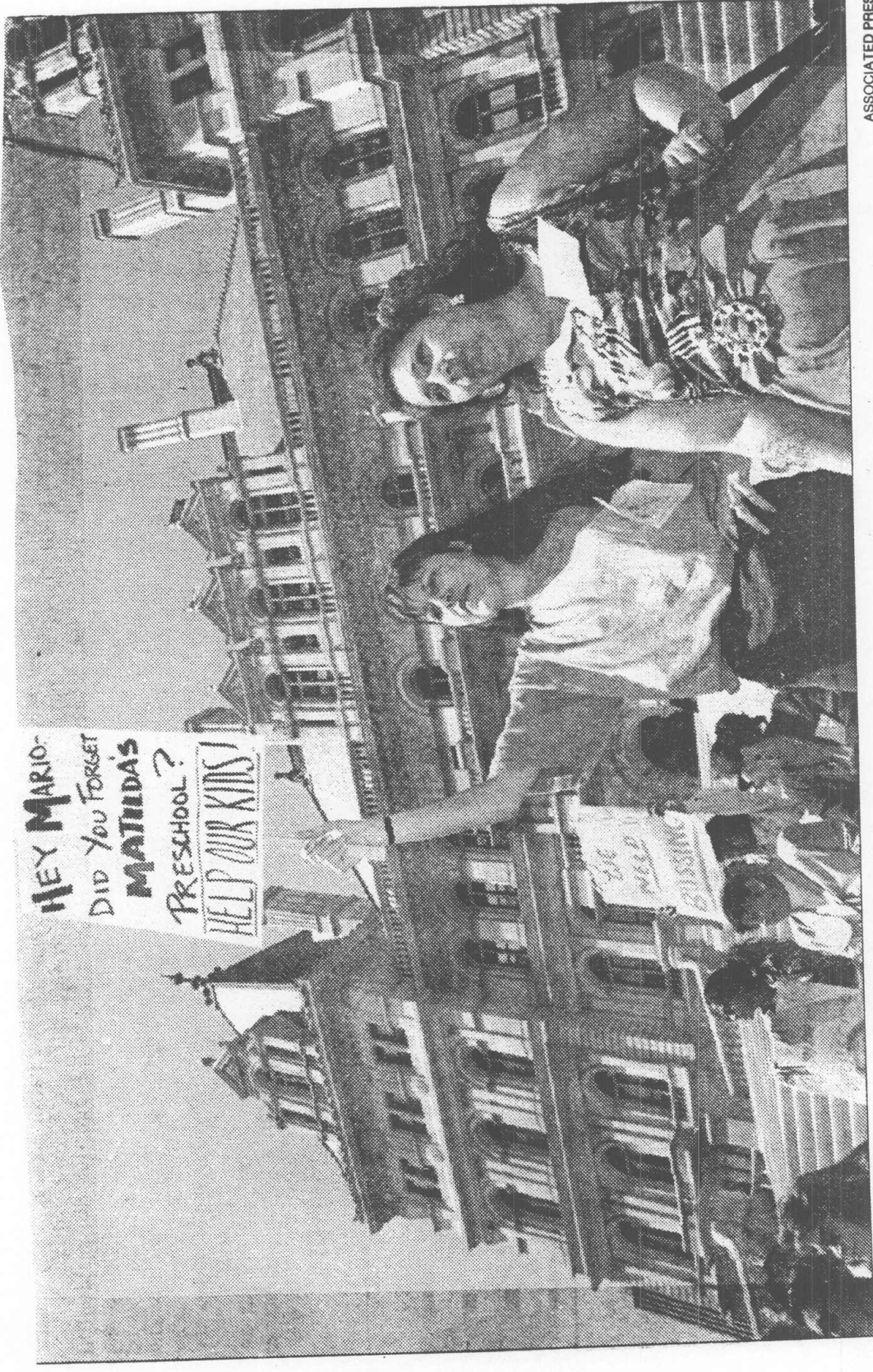
"My daughter is confused and does not understand what she has done wrong to not be

allowed on the bus," said Mary Anne Cavalcante, mother of Jamie, a 4-year-old with physical, learning disabilities and hearing impairments. They live on the naval base in Fort Wadsworth.

Twenty-eight out of 60 preschoolers have been absent from special education programs at the United Cerebral Palsy's Port Richmond Center the past week because of a lack of bus service, said Craig Curry, assistant executive director.

Sophia Satari of Midland Beach, who attended the rally, said she is now transporting her 5-year-old son, John, to and from his classes while working. "I don't want him to miss a class. It's very difficult," she said.

Meanwhile, the Pre-School Transportation Alliance, whose bus companies are now without contracts, have hired some big guns to press their case. Working on their behalf is the high-powered, politically connected lobbying firm of Davidoff & Molito, as well as Howard J. Rubenstein Associates, a public relations concern.



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Jinette Quinones, left, of Queens, protests with other parents at the State Capitol in Albany to urge officials to make arrangements for preschool children who have no way to get to school.

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