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Cuomo makes a name for himself in replacing Spitzer

By Kathy Chu, USA TODAY

When he took office this year as New York's attorney general, Andrew Cuomo knew he'd be measured against the legacy of his predecessor, Eliot Spitzer, who is now governor.

Yet in his first few months in office, Cuomo is creating headlines of his own by waging a high-profile drive to reform the \$85 billion student-loan industry. Cuomo has attacked revenue-sharing deals between lenders and colleges and other practices that he says amount to student-loan abuses.

The state attorney general, a son of former New York governor Mario Cuomo, has made headlines and put lenders and aid administrators on notice in his national investigation.

Why has Cuomo seized on this issue so aggressively and so early in his tenure? For one thing, he's moving forward with an issue that Spitzer himself had begun looking into before leaving office. The campaign is also one that hits home, notes the elder Cuomo, now in private practice with the law firm Willkie Farr & Gallagher. He "had a (college) loan, and so did his sister."

So far, the attorney general has helped bring three lenders and 15 universities to settlements in his bid to ban what he says are inducements that lenders have given universities for student-loan business. He's crafted a code of conduct for lenders and financial aid administrators that's rapidly becoming a model for other states.

His position, he said at a news conference this month, is "very simple: (Colleges') loan decisions should be made in the best interests of the students, and not in the best interest of the school. You can either settle with us, or we'll continue" investigating.

Cuomo has chased down information from lenders and financial aid officials while staying tight-lipped on other topics. It's a reticence he hasn't always shown in the past. In 2002, Cuomo told a busload of reporters that after Sept. 11, then-governor George Pataki held Mayor Rudy Giuliani's "coat" rather than leading the state's recovery. Critics suggested that that comment contributed to a drop in voter support — and ultimately, to his failed bid to become governor.

"It was an intemperate remark" that helped bring down Cuomo's campaign, says Michael McKeon, a Republican consultant who served as Pataki's spokesman.

Cuomo, through his spokesman, Arthur Harris, declined to be interviewed. Harris says the attorney general wants to "let his work speak for itself." (Harris offered no further comments.)

That work includes Cuomo's eight years at the Department of Housing and Urban Development;

four of them as HUD secretary under President Clinton. Cuomo has said he's proud to have reduced fraud and waste at the agency; critics contended at the time that he didn't act quickly or decisively enough to combat those problems.

McKeon, who campaigned for Jeanine Pirro, the Republican whom Cuomo defeated in the attorney general's race last year, says Cuomo seems to have reined in the off-the-cuff remarks that sometimes backfired on him in the distant past. During Pirro's run against Cuomo, McKeon says, her staff "egged (Cuomo) on whenever we could to see if he would implode himself. But he was a much more disciplined candidate."

The elder Cuomo suggests that the attorney general also learned from his father's own political gaffes and his years as governor.

"One invaluable contribution I have made to his career is his watching me make so many mistakes as governor," Mario Cuomo said in an interview. "Andrew was saying to pick one, two, three things to concentrate on and keep banging on them. I concentrated on a lot of things, so very few people saw me as an education governor, an infrastructure governor."

The attorney general, one of five children of the former governor and his wife, Matilda, appears to be taking his own advice. He ran his campaign on a few key platforms, including gun control, government integrity and health care fraud. Supporters say they expect him eventually to make as much noise on these issues as on the student-loan industry.

To make an indelible mark, though, he may need to build considerable distance from Spitzer's legacy and to step out of his father's shadow. Mitchell Moss, a New York University professor who served as an informal adviser to Governor Cuomo, says Andrew has "found a voice as the champion of parents."

McKeon says the attorney general has matured as a politician.

"Before," McKeon says, "he had the reputation as one of those guys where the most dangerous place was between him and the TV camera. This time, he's kept his head down. He's grown up a lot."