

# Staten Island Advance

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## School board election postponed for a year

Cuomo signs delay bill with an eye to reform, new districts

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ALBANY — Community school board elections will be postponed for a year under a controversial measure signed into law by Gov. Mario M. Cuomo last night.

The law will extend the three-year terms of current Staten Island Community School District 31 board members another year by delaying elections until May 1993. The elections were scheduled to be held in May.

Island board members had mixed feelings about the law. But would-be challengers for seats on the school board were outraged.

In his approval message, Cuomo said he agreed with the rationale given by many lawmakers that the 12-month delay will give Albany the time to craft new district lines and implement many of the reforms advanced by the Temporary State Commission on New York City Governance, chaired by Sen. John J. Marchi, R-Ward Hill.

But Marchi opposed a simple postponement of the elections without changes in the system. Some lawmakers and government watchdog groups criticized the measure as anti-democratic and protective of incumbents. They questioned whether legislators will pass many of the proposals offered by the Marchi Commission.

"I believe that the next 12 months present us with our best opportunity to reach agreement on the creation of new district lines and on the restructuring of the New York City school system as a whole," Cuomo said.

"These changes will result both in a more equitable voting system and in a school system that is more responsive to the desires of parents and more accountable to the general public."

The governor noted that Mayor David N. Dinkins supported the delay in the elections so that legislation could be enacted. Holding elections this May, Cuomo said, will result in continued representation based upon outdated lines for another three years.

The current district lines have not been adjusted in more than 20 years, resulting in a wide disparity in population among the city's 35 school districts. The Island's District 31 is the largest.

"Under these circumstances," Cuomo said, "I believe that it is better to authorize a temporary delay in the elections so that we can correct this inequity and reform the system at the same time."

Marchi, who wrote the original decentralization law in 1969, and Assembly Education Committee Chairman Angelo Del Toro, D-Manhattan, vice chairman of the Marchi panel, introduced a bill of reforms last year, but no action was taken.

Marchi argued the new law is vulnerable to a lawsuit because 10 districts have populations below the minimum 15,000 limit. He acknowledged they could have been challenged at any time in prior years and wouldn't be surprised if potential challengers or advocacy groups now go to court.

Marchi said he didn't fault the governor for his action because there were legitimate arguments for the measure as well as against.

"It was a close call. Well, I hope he's right. I hope they will attack the problem," he said.

But Marchi stressed a redistricting panel should have been put in place as a way to prod the Legislature to act.

The senator noted that political considerations played a key role in favor of postponement, particularly among New York City Democrats in the Assembly. Democratic primaries would have been

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held a month after the school board elections. In many parts of the city, school board members and their supporters carry a lot of political clout.

"They may say, 'Gee, he disregarded us and our schools,'" Marchi said of elected school

board members who wanted a postponement. "All you need is a few (political) clubs against you (to affect a primary vote)."

Jerry Cammarata, a member of the Island's school board, lauded Cuomo for his "prudent and intelligent" decision.

Cammarata noted the postponed elections will enable the Island's "senior board" to select a

permanent superintendent to replace Louis DeSario, who retired in January. Christy Cugini was named temporary acting superintendent.

"The board can make intelligent decisions of appointing assistant principals and principals and move toward establishing a permanent superintendent for the district," he said.