

School board election a measure of concern

Many of us complain that big government, with all its myriad departments and agencies, is out of touch with the common citizen.

We vote, if at all, reluctantly, adding our tiny voices to the din of democracy in a densely populated, politically tumultuous area. That seems our only role in government, which we cynically see as accessible to the affluent and aggressive, and not to ordinary people.

We feel that things are beyond our control, and eulogize the long-gone days of small town meetings, where things were hashed out by citizens, and everyone had their say.

Unfortunately, the criticisms may really apply to much of the governmental bureaucracy. But there are still those small public institutions in which ordinary citizens can play as big a part as they choose to play. The community boards are there for anyone with the dedication to work for them.

And so too is the Community School Board. The board has labored in obscurity for most of its existence since it was created several decades ago specifically to involve ordinary people.

Few people paid much attention to its doings, despite the extraordinary impact the board has on public education in this borough. Fewer bother to vote in school board elections, and fewer still ran for seats on the board, unwilling to make the sacrifice in time and energy all the board members make.

But because of the extraordinary uproar over the "Children of the Rainbow" curriculum guide this past year, that may change. The controversy, with its fevered outrage and occasional nastiness (from all sides) was not always the source of reasoned debate and democratic compromise that believers in decentralized education might have envisioned for school boards.

But to take the long view, it may have been the best thing to happen to the school board in terms of citizen participation in its entire history. For once, a substantial portion of Islanders knew something about a public school issue, and they learned something about the figures on the school board and how the board works. In governmental parlance, they were engaged.

The Rainbow controversy is raging anew, with the Staten Island Community School

Board's defiance of the Chancellor on the latest revisions. But even should the local school board prevail that should not mean an end to Islanders' full involvement in the school board. There are many, many important issues in public education beyond a controversial curriculum guide — inadequate classroom space, deteriorating schools, academic standards and ever-present budget decisions are just three areas of concern.

In the inevitable calm after the Rainbow storm is over, reasonable people should agree that those issues and many others are of much more vital concern to those who care about the welfare of public school children. Those issues are not so sexy perhaps, or such a perfect platform for righteous indignation, but certainly no less important than Children of the Rainbow.

The question is this: Is the widespread concern for public education expressed during the current controversy a fleeting thing? Or will Islanders sustain that level of interest and translate it into full participation in the future?

We'll know pretty soon. Feb. 16 is the deadline for would-be school board candidates to file petitions (with 200 signatures) in order to get on the ballot. All nine school board seats up for a vote.

Then, on May 4, there will be the school board election. All registered voters are automatically eligible to vote in that election.

If the past is any indication, a handful of school board incumbents and challengers will arrange for their respective claque of supporters to vote in an election with a dismally small turnout. So those who manage to drum up a few more supporters than others will win. The election is usually a reflection of the various candidates' political support than of the interests of the people of Staten Island.

But the interest sparked by the curriculum furor has created a momentum which, if sustained, can change the significance of the school board. This year, Islanders have a rare opportunity to shine a bright new light into this historic back alley of local governance and transform it into a thriving, democratic marketplace of educational ideas.

Will it happen? We hope so.