

Education

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1994

Parents side with schools chancellor on budget

Cortines expected to be offered contract extension

Staten Islanders who helped elect Mayor Rudolph Giuliani last year threatened to turn their backs on him if his spending cuts hurt classrooms.

The sentiment not only reflects an anger over depleted Island schools, but a fondness for Schools Chancellor Ramon Cortines, who has garnered support among parents on Staten Island.

During the protest outside City Hall last Monday, parents took Cortines' side in his feud with Giuliani. The mayor became the subject of the wrath of more than 200 Islanders who chanted "No more cuts. Rudy must be nuts" and "We put you in. We'll take you out."

"I don't feel he's trying to work with Cortines," said Barbara Tepper, a parent from Mariners Harbor.

"This is a power struggle," said Linda Williams, president of the Staten Island Federation of PTAs. "Giuliani is saying, 'You'll do it my way or else.'"

Mrs. Williams said Cortines has won the support of many Islanders during his many visits to the Island schools. "I've never seen another chancellor so accessible to parents. I've personally called him and spoke to him about problems. He told me he'd take care of it, and he did," she said.

A day after the protest, the mayor accused Cortines of protecting the bureaucracy and scaring parents into thinking cuts had to come from the

classroom. Giuliani stepped up his campaign to have Cortines resign, saying he had no confidence in the chancellor's ability to reform the city school system.

The chancellor has not said whether he wants to stay at the helm of the nation's largest school system. But he does have the support of five of the seven Board of Education members, including Staten Island representative Louis DeSario. Board members will formally evaluate Cortines before Wednesday, when they are expected to offer him a renewal of his \$195,000 contract.

But as the fight intensifies, at least one member of the Staten Island Community School Board has sided firmly with the mayor. Jerry Cammarata said "the mayor is right" to take a hard line against Cortines.

"I think the chancellor is being misguided by the people working for him and not giving the mayor the appropriate information he needs," said Cammarata.

Cammarata said Staten Islanders who protested against City Hall have been "sold a bill of goods by the unions and the chancellor who fault the mayor for pulling dollars back."

"The mayor wants the board to show how they're spending the money," said Cammarata.

The day of the protest, fiscal watchdog Herman Badillo threatened to subpoena computer records

of Board of Ed expenses. On Tuesday, Cortines handed over them over, but chastised Badillo for releasing information on spending in October which later proved to be flawed.

Borough President Guy V. Molinari has injected himself into the battle in defense of Cortines. The borough president said Giuliani is employing an "intensive bullying effort" to chase Cortines out of town.

Cammarata, once closely aligned with Molinari, said the borough president is "waffling." He noted that Molinari also supported Cortines' predecessor Joseph Fernandez.

"I don't know if this is about the quality of the job done by Cortines, or (about) the conflict between him and the mayor," said Cammarata.

Molinari said Cammarata has a case of "sour grapes because he did not get the appointment (to the Board of Education) by me to succeed Michael Petrides."

Molinari said his support for the chancellor "has nothing to do" with his differences with the mayor.

"I have said that the mayor has done a good job. But this is one area where he's making a very serious mistake.

"If Cammarata and others side with the mayor I have to warn them it's not a popular side and they will lose credibility."

Shopping for the school

The shopping center as school concept won't die if Board member Ira Goldstein gets his way.



Laura D'Angelo

SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

Goldstein said he plans to resurrect the proposal to lease space at a newly constructed shopping center during next month's discussion meeting.

The local school board doesn't have the power to approve a lease, only to request that the Board of Ed evaluate it as a possible solution to overcrowding on the Island's congested South Shore.

The resolution to forward the leasing concept to the Board of Ed was nixed last week after Salvatore Ballarino produced a secret document — which was distributed to board members but kept from the eyes of the public.

The document was reportedly a letter from workers at the site who claimed the building under construction has "serious" water problems.

Goldstein said he's neither for or against the proposal, but criticized the way the board made its decision. "When we make a decision everything should be out on the table," he said.