

Staten Island schools suffered losses in 1994

The year 1994 delivered more losses than gains to Staten Island school children.

Lost were a proposed new school, an established alternative school, a nationally acclaimed youth program, a free Latchkey program and a fierce advocate for Staten Island schools with the passing of Michael J. Petrides.

So-called "social issues," like condoms and Children of the Rainbow dominated the landscape in 1993. But this year the fights were about money.

The dispute over condoms in schools ended last January when the courts mandated that parents be allowed to block their children from getting condoms. Three percent of Island parents exercised that right.

Rudy vs. Ramon

It wasn't long before things heated up again. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Schools Chancellor Ramon Cortines became embroiled in a feud over spending cuts that almost sent Cortines packing — twice.

Following a midnight meeting at Gracie Mansion in April, Cortines resigned saying his "integrity is not for sale." Cortines accused the mayor of blackmailing him into booting two top staffers.

Petrides, who not only helped elect Giuliani but had a hand in hiring Cortines, found himself in the middle. "I feel like a failed marriage counselor," he said.

After an outpouring of support from parents and political leaders, Cortines returned to the job two days later.

Space, the final frontier

Meanwhile, Island parents were absorbed in matters more pressing — space. Overcrowding problems had reached into almost every Island elementary and intermediate school. At PS 22 in Graniteville, fourth-graders were learning in a hallway that connected a locker room to a bathroom.

On the Island's South Shore where school seats remain at a premium, outraged parents put pressure on the Department of City Planning to temporarily halt development. On June 7, nearly 1,000 parents marched in the rain, calling for new schools now.

In Willowbrook, an alternative school that turned scores of potential dropouts into intermediate-school graduates, quietly closed its doors after school officials didn't seek a renewal of an \$800,000 federal grant for Elite.

A political shift on the school board created a rift that remains today. The board's moderate and liberal wing took control in June when it harnessed a majority vote, and elected Eleanor Conforti as chairwoman. She beat Jerry Cammarata in his bid, which he quickly withdrew before the formal vote.

The legacy of Michael Petrides

On June 30, Petrides, one of this borough's most influential political strategists and the intellectual leader of the central board's so-called "Gang of Four," died of lung cancer.

His dual role as a political operative and a two-term member of the Board of Ed bolstered the Republican party and paved the way for the election of Giuliani, the city's first Republican mayor in a generation.

Petrides' friend and longtime political ally Borough President Guy V. Molinari described Petrides



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SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

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as a "genius." The College of Staten Island's Sunnyside campus was named after Petrides who had worked to capture the 42-acre site for public schools.

Following Petrides' death, Molinari formed a search committee to pick a replacement at the Board of Ed. Cammarata had strong support among parents, but Molinari picked former superintendent Louis DeSario instead.

On August 17, Molinari and the mayor he helped elect had a falling out, that would reverberate in the education world. Molinari accused Giuliani of betraying his daughter, Rep. Susan Molinari by not telling her he planned to back President Clinton's crime bill which she had opposed.

Meanwhile, DeSario was busy learning the ropes at "central" when he discovered that funds for two new Island schools had been rerouted to projects in other boroughs.

DeSario reeled one of the schools, PS 56, back into the capital budget. But it's proposed twin school, PS 6, was gone from the five-year spending plan.

Painful budget cuts

In schools, children were losing more programs. The school board eliminated the first-grade gifted program, a free Latchkey program, and scaled back the drug prevention program. Then came more trouble.

A third budget cut — \$32 per student — was passed down to the schools.

Saying enough is enough, nearly 200 Staten Islanders braved the biting cold outside City Hall last month to protest the mayor's latest set of cuts. Protesting parents shouted at the rally: "No more cuts. Rudy must be nuts." and "We put you in we'll take you out."

Saying the chancellor had not cut the board's bureaucracy deeply enough, Giuliani lobbied hard to oust Cortines when the chancellor's contract was up for renewal last month. Molinari injected himself into the flap, siding with Cortines and taking a swipe at Giuliani. The Board of Education in a 5-2 vote approved an extension of Cortines' \$195,000 contract, and he agreed to stay for another two years.