

# Staten Island Advance

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"TODAY, THE BOARD TAUGHT OUR CHILDREN A POWERFUL LESSON — MEDIOCRITY IS NOT ACCEPTABLE."  
— *Councilman Stephen J. Fala (R-South Shore)*

## Crew comes up a little short

■ By a 4-3 vote, Board of Education refuses to renew schools chancellor's contract

By REGINALD PATRICK  
ADVANCE CITY HALL BUREAU

The Board of Education, meeting yesterday behind closed doors, voted to bounce Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew from the \$245,000-a-year post he's held since 1995.

Depending on whom you talked yesterday, Crew, who has recently been on chilly terms with City Hall over the school voucher issue, was either a victim of the brand of hardball politics practiced in the Big Apple or a casualty of his own inability to perform up to standards expected of the administrator of the nation's largest school system.

The chancellor's exit — his contract officially expires in June — has also raised troubling questions about what it might take to at-

tract a top-flight educator to a high-profile position that has seen such an alarming turnover in the past decade. Crew is the eighth person to hold the post in a dozen years.

With only a matter of months left on Crew's contract, the board made it clear last night after its emergency executive session in Brooklyn that it may be forced to buy out the remainder of the lame-duck chancellor's contract and scramble to set up a search committee to find a successor. Those issues will be the subject of a board meeting on Tuesday.

"I believe that the chancellor would honor his contract, but at the same time, it is unfair to ask him to serve for a short time as a lame duck," said Board President William Thompson.

The board president, who had been negotiating with Crew in the hopes of extending his contract for several years, joined two other members — Dr. Sandra Lerner of the Bronx and Dr. Irving S. Hamer Jr. of Manhattan — in casting votes to extend the chancellor's contract.

In the 4 to 3 vote, the three board members

loyal to Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani — Deputy Mayor Nimita Segarra, Dr. Irene Impellizzeri of Brooklyn and Jerry Cammarata of Staten Island — said Crew should leave. Terri Thompson of Queens proved the swing vote.

Mincing no words, Thompson charged Crew had been the target of a hit ordered by City Hall. "The mayor's fingerprints are on this. It's unfortunate that politics has crept into this."

But Giuliani countered that the members set on giving Crew the boot had made up their own minds. He said he had spoken to each of them "at one time or another."

"They felt very strongly about what they wanted to do," the mayor explained. "They were concerned about things any reasonable person has a right to be concerned about. I did not ask them to do anything. They did something they wanted to do."

Giuliani charged that Crew's actions in the past several weeks had pretty much sealed his fate. He pointed, for example, to city and



Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew won't be facing the New York media much longer. ASSOCIATED PRESS

his fate. He pointed, for example, to city and state reports charging that on Crew's watch teachers have helped students cheat on standardized tests and that some high schools have doctored attendance figures to increase aid. Instead of accepting the findings, Giuliani said, Crew had lashed out at city and state investigators.

The mayor also noted that the chancellor, in negotiations with Thompson through a lawyer, had sought a \$500,000 pension sweetener and a raise on his \$245,000 salary. The disparaging comments the chancellor had directed at Councilman Stephen J. Fiala (R-South Shore) had also not helped the Crew's case, the mayor said.

Last week Crew dismissed Fiala's call for his ouster by saying the diminutive lawmaker was "too short" to criticize him and could not call for his resignation until he got "taller." The chancellor later claimed the remarks had been a metaphorical reference to Fiala's lack of experience in the education arena.

Ironically, Giuliani, like other Crew critics, at one point praised the chancellor for his early work in the post but said the management of the school system — in its current form — is beyond anyone.

"I think Crew did a good job within the limits of a system that

doesn't work," the mayor said. "The problem is not with what Crew did, but that he worked in a system not designed for success. This bureaucracy should be done away with."

Cammarata, the Island board member, agreed, saying Crew did "yeoman" work in the post but apparently lacked the political and management skills to keep the system on track. He compared the chancellor to a chief executive of a Fortune 500 firm who had been judged unable to steer a solid course for the company.

"His leaving is not a dark day for the Board of Education," Cammarata said. "Children are not going to suffer. Not a beat will be lost." The board official also insisted the search for a new chancellor will not be insurmountable. He'd like to see a New Yorker savvy to this city's political dynamics put in the job. "Crew never learned how to do business in New York," Cammarata said. "But there are a lot of people out there who want this job because it's motivating and stimulating."

Queens member Terri Thomson, the swing vote that sealed Crew's fate, hotly denied last night that anyone had coerced her vote.

"I made the decision on my own," she insisted. "And after a great deal of soul-searching." She said she had been "troubled" by

Crew's "defense of the bureaucracy," and his apparent indecision over "whether he wanted to go or stay."

"We need a chancellor with a fire in the belly and a passion for change," she maintained.

Deputy Mayor Segarra, the mayor's point person on the Board, said some members of the panel had been put off by the manner in which Crew was angling for a contract extension — directly with Thompson and through a lawyer.

In a statement last night, Crew praised his supporters but said it was apparently time to move on.

"Last spring, it became clear that this coalition [of supporters] could not be sustained, and that it might be impossible to restore the solidarity that marked my first three years as chancellor," Crew said. "It is now time for a new leader to build upon our accomplishments and move this school system into the new millennium."

He sought last night to list some of his accomplishments. He spoke of attempts to straighten out the system's "Byzantine financial operation," improve reading scores, end social promotions, restore arts in the classroom and end overreliance on special education.

His supporters on the board said his efforts would be sorely missed.

"What has happened here today is a recipe for disaster for the school system," Thompson charged. Dr. Hamer called the board vote "an irresponsible act."

"I was particularly disheartened by the fact that the vote came within 10 minutes of our sitting down to meet," Hamer said. "That means the decision was made beforehand. The decision was not made on the merits of the individual."

"It's going to be a long day and very cold hell before we find a replacement," he said.

Randi Weingarten, president of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), said the chancellor's fate "represents a failure of political leadership in this city and it is stunning how quickly it came about."

"The uncertainty and instability that will likely result from his departure could not have come at a worse time, particularly with so many critical reforms supported by the UFT under way," she said. "These include the 40 low-performing schools taken over by the chancellor just this September and the end of social promotion, which will involve more than 300,000 students in summer school."

Fiala said: "While I applaud Dr. Crew as an educational visionary, I don't think he was an effective

administrator. The performance of our school system during Dr. Crew's tenure was mediocre at best, and, as chief executive of that system, Dr. Crew bears the ultimate responsibilities for its failures.

"Today, the board taught our children a powerful lesson — mediocrity is not acceptable," Fiala said.

The lawmaker is pushing an educational reform proposal to eliminate both the chancellor's post and the central Board of Education, replacing them with borough boards of education that would be jointly appointed by the mayor and the borough presidents.

Councilman Jerome X. O'Donovan (D-North Shore), who has been a staunch Crew supporter, called the board's action a big mistake.

"Now we have to do this all over again," he complained. "It's going to be extremely hard to find a qualified candidate to replace Crew because of the track record of chancellors in this city. They come and they go."

Crew was not present at board headquarters for yesterday's vote. When asked why the chancellor was absent, a board spokesman, Phil Russo, told reporters Crew preferred not to be present for his "lynching."

Ironically the two Rudys — Crew and Giuliani — once had a warm relationship. The pair watched baseball games at Yankee Stadium, smoked cigars at Gracie Mansion and read to children at public schools for photos.

One of the chancellor's most significant victories came in 1997 when — with Giuliani's support — he won state and federal approval to make it easier for the chancellor to assume control of poorly performing schools or districts by removing superintendents and community school board members.

Most recently, City Hall and the chancellor worked hand in hand to obtain an agreement from the school administrators' union to end principal tenure.

But an irreparable rift developed between the two after Giuliani's position on school vouchers evolved into wholehearted support and the mayor set aside \$12 million in the city budget for an experimental program. Crew complained that such a program would drain resources from public schools and at one point threatened to resign. But the tension between the two continued as Giuliani repeatedly criticized the public school system as "dysfunctional."

Last night Cammarata, the Island Board member, labeled Crew a "whiner."