

A community shines

The following open letter was written by Borough President Guy V. Molinari in reaction to the superb, coordinated effort to help the community of PS 36 in Annadale recover after the arson fire last weekend.

My fellow Staten Islanders,

Last weekend, the Staten Island community suffered a devastating loss when arson struck PS 36. It destroyed many classrooms and forced the dislocation of close to a thousand young students. It is hard to understand how two 16-year-old youths committed this malicious act of arson and deliberately set about wrecking a facility dedicated to educating young people.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, we must recognize and acknowledge the Staten Islanders who came together in a variety of different ways to address the problem. As borough president, I view this as one of Staten Island's proudest moments. Men and women of good will stepped forward to help the schoolchildren of PS 36.

Led by Principal Kathleen Staleman, Assistant Principals Annette Ashton-Scheff and Robert Martinelli, and PS 36 PTA co-presidents Gail Curylo and Julianne Angelico, the parents pulled together in a time of need to donate materials and their time to assist teachers and students so that their temporary move could be a pleasant one.

And most especially, we must applaud the efforts of the group that perhaps suffered the profoundest loss — our splendid teachers. I heard many of their stories and personal tragedies. This was not just a school building set on fire; the arsonists destroyed many of the faculty's personal items and teaching aides that can never be replaced.

The incident has been devastating for them all. Yet each morning the teachers greet these children with smiles. I am extremely impressed by the dedication and professionalism of the teachers and the way they adapted to a changing environment. Our community must rally around those educators to let them know their ability to continue on despite their own pain and suffering has not gone unnoticed.

Applause must be given to District 31 School Superintendent Christy Cugini, who did a superb job. He and his staff worked collectively on the myriad problems that confronted our education system. It was truly exciting to see our young people given such a role model for community spirit and leadership.

Another bright spot is, of course, the humanitarian efforts of Dr. Norman Smith and the Wagner College family, who stepped forward on a moment's notice and unselfishly offered their state-of-the-art facilities to help the youngest members of our community. And particular thanks to Dr. Richard Guarasci, provost and vice president for academic affairs, who has greeted the students enthusiastically every day.

I visited the college three times myself. First to speak with parents and again on the first two mornings the students arrived. It was a joy to see the little ones in a college setting where some would have the added benefit of enjoying the college planetarium and the ultra-modern Spiro gymnasium. This is a positive experience they will carry with them forever.

A world of thanks also must go to Nancy Lisiewski, principal of Bernstein Intermediate School, who opened her doors and worked with us so that the older children from PS 36 had a productive and comfortable experience at her facility as well.

We are extremely grateful to Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and Interim Schools Chancellor Harold Levy, both of whom have pledged whatever resources are necessary in order to return the PS 36 school environment to order. Office of Emergency Management Commissioner Richard Sheirer, an Islander himself, spent many hours at both PS 36 and Wagner College with numerous members of his staff overseeing the relocation and clean-up efforts.

The dozens of workers laboring around the clock to restore the school building should also not go unnoticed. Because of their hard work, the school will be better than ever when the children go back home to their classrooms.

I want to thank Jerry Cammarata, Staten Island's representative to the New York City Board of Education and Len DeRio, the District 31 director of Support Services, who, together with their staffs, have provided invaluable support, as did the Office of Pupil Transportation, which pulled together the buses to transport the students. Gratitude must also go to our school board members who made visits to the site, as well as officials from the School Construction Authority and the Division of School Facilities.

Kudos also to Assistant Chief Eugene S. Devlin, Staten Island Borough Commander, and all of the New York City Police Department officials, including those from the School Safety Division, who have done everything from leading the motorcade escorting the children to Wagner and Bernstein Intermediate, to being on hand to assist the teachers and students at their new locations.

I'd like to take a moment to praise members of my own cabinet, Deputy Borough President James P. Molinaro, Chief of Staff Daniel Donovan, and our Education Liaison, Marsha Meyer, who worked tirelessly from just hours after the fire assisting school officials and police to finding secure interim locations for the children. There are so many others who have worked with us in this time of need and I'd like to express my deepest gratitude to all those unsung heroes who played a role in coping with this disaster.

Once again, Staten Islanders have come together to support one another and unselfishly given of their time for the benefit of others. Thankfully, from the ashes of a tragedy, this became one of Staten Island's shining moments.

Editorial

Staten Island Sunday Advance

MARCH 19, 2000