

Molinari disagrees with schools chief over aid to Island

■ Levy had suggested that the borough gets a lopsided amount of federal assistance for disadvantaged students

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New York Schools Chancellor Harold Levy yesterday suggested that Staten Island receives a lopsided amount of federal aid for disadvantaged students, in a memo obtained by the Advance.

The suggestion prompted an angry response from Borough President Guy V. Molinari, whose daughter, Susan, then a congresswoman, moved legislation to change the funding formula.

Staten Island receives about \$9 million in federal Title I funds, an allocation based on the number of students here who receive free lunch. By law, the boroughs receive federal funds on a county-by-county basis.

Prior to Ms. Molinari's 1995 measure, the Board of Education pooled funding from the five boroughs for distribution to the poorest school districts in the city, leaving Staten Island with just 1 percent of Title I funds, even though the borough educates roughly 2 percent of the city's Title I-eligible children. Critics claimed the change came at the expense of Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx, where allocations decreased.

In an e-mail to Board of Education president Ninfa Segarra, Levy wrote about the system's general financial problems, weeks after it was revealed the Board of Education had overspent its five-year school construction budget by \$1.5 billion, putting six Queens schools in jeopardy.

"The Title I allocation compounds the overall problem," he said. "Several years ago, Congress arbitrarily redirected Title I funding, to the benefit of Staten Island and to the detriment of other boroughs. These legislative changes created serious permanent inequities in the overall funding structure.

"We may want to petition Congress to reconsider its Title I 'county rule' and review more seriously the allocation formulas next year," he said.

Levy continued that because the federal government is using 1996 census data to update its Title I allocation process, the situation will worsen. Staten Island's represen-

tative to the Board of Education, Jerry Cammarata, predicted earlier this year the borough could get a larger share of the funding pie because of a recent influx of immigrants in poorer North Shore areas, as evidenced by census data.

About 68 percent of its student body must be eligible for free lunch in order for a school to qualify for Title I funds. The nine Staten Island schools that will receive the funding in school year 2001-2002 are PS 14 in Stapleton, PS 16 in Tompkinsville, PS 18 and PS 19 in West Brighton, PS 20 in Port Richmond, PS 31 in New Brighton, PS 44 in Mariners Harbor, PS 57 in Clifton and Dreyfus Intermediate School in Stapleton.

There are 838 Title I-eligible schools from throughout the city in the coming school year, with 40 of them newly designated.

Molinari said Levy seemed to be trying to justify the Board of Education's more serious financial problems based on a "comparatively nickel-and-dime" issue.

"To suggest that the Title I funds are responsible for the shortfall is ridiculous," said Molinari. "It's really appalling to read that memo and to see the chancellor pointing a finger at that problem as symptomatic of the educational problems confronting the system."

By Molinari's estimation, the borough would receive around \$5 to \$6 million under the old funding formula. The difference between today's \$9 million is relatively small when compared to the Board of Education's overall budget of nearly \$12 billion, said Molinari.

When told of the borough president's reaction to the memo, Levy said through a spokeswoman, "I have too much respect for Guy Molinari and the excellent work he's done over the years to publicly disagree with him." Nevertheless, the chancellor stands by the position he took in the e-mail, said spokeswoman Karen Finney.

As for Congress, Molinari said he is uncertain how much support New York Democratic Sens. Charles Schumer and Hillary Clinton would throw behind the funding formula that Molinari considers equitable.

Rep. Vito Fossella (R-Staten Island) successfully fought off an effort to restore the pre-1995 Title I distribution in the fall of 1999, when several colleagues from Queens and Brooklyn led the charge. He pledged to work as diligently if the chancellor presses the issue. "It's like the movie 'Groundhog Day,'" said Fossella. "Every time they're looking for money, they're looking to grab it out of Staten Island."