

New President

Head of city's public school board has Catholic roots

By **BRIAN CAULFIELD**

Ninfa Segarra, who was elected last week as president of the New York City Board of Education with the unexpected vote of a policy opponent, has been embroiled in a number of controversies since she opposed the public schools' proposed AIDS curriculum as a board member in 1992. At that time, she gained the support of Cardinal O'Connor, who saw the "Children of the Rainbow" curriculum as an assault on traditional morals and the rights of parents to instruct their children according to those morals.

Ms. Segarra, 50, was elected president April 4 in a vote among the seven Board of Education members, made up of those named by the five borough presidents and two mayoral appointees. The fact that she gained only four votes, including her own, with the other three members abstaining, indicates the board's strong divisions.

The deciding vote was cast by Irving S. Hamer Jr., the representative from Manhattan, who has opposed Ms. Segarra and Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani on privatization and mayoral control of the schools.

The mayor named Ms. Segarra to the board in 1994 and reappointed her in 1998. With her as president, he is expected to have a stronger voice on the board and more control of the schools.

Fellow board member Jerry Cammarata, who nominated her for the post, praised Ms. Segarra for her intellectual rigor and moral integrity, calling her "eminently qualified to be the leader of a million children" of the public schools.

"She shares the values the board has viewed as important in the past and will remain important in the future," he told CNY.

Dr. Irene Impellizzeri, the other board member appointed by Giuliani, called her "scholarly,

clear-headed and thoughtful" and said she has a record of achievement "a mile long as a public servant."

In December 1993 Giuliani made Ms. Segarra his first appointment as the newly elected mayor, naming her Deputy Mayor for Education and Human Services. She held the post until last April, when she moved to the City University of New York as vice president for Inter-Campus Collaboration of the CUNY Research Foundation. The board presidency, paying \$20,000 a year, is not a full-time position.

The deputy mayor appointment was seen at the time as an effort by Giuliani to reach out to the city's Hispanic population. He called her a "role model and a hero" and a "model of integrity." Ms. Segarra told CNY at the time that her appointment to an education post was significant for Latinos because schooling is "our ticket out of poverty."

As she has advanced in city government, she has become a model for those seeking to rise from humble beginnings to positions of power. The daughter of Puerto Rican-born parents, she grew up in a housing project on Manhattan's lower East Side and attended Our Lady of Sorrows School and Cathedral High School. She graduated from New York University in 1973 and worked her way through New York Law School as a night student, earning her law degree in 1983. She lives in the Riverdale section of the Bronx and has two teenage children in public schools.

In a statement for CNY, Ms. Segarra stressed her humble upbringing and the sacrifice made by her parents to send her and her younger sister to Catholic schools. Catholic education "instilled in me values on which I rely heavily today" and the academic foundation for college and law school, she said.

As president of the board, she added, "I shall work to improve the quality of our schools and to

ensure that all children receive the education necessary to prosper."

In a fractious conflict over the AIDS curriculum in 1992 which incited raucous public hearings and sharp political divisions, Ms. Segarra surprised many by breaking with her patron at the time, Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, and proclaiming her stance as a matter of conscience and service to children. Withstanding pressure to resign from Ferrer, who appointed Ms. Segarra to the board in 1990, she joined three other board members to defeat the AIDS curriculum promoted by Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez and later pushed to oust him from office. The curriculum included positive portrayals of homosexual relationships and of children being raised by same-sex couples.

"I will not allow the children's welfare to be sacrificed for the political interests of others," she said at the time.

Cardinal O'Connor praised her and her allies on the board from the pulpit, calling them "extraordinary missionaries" who were criticized because "they said they believe the various curricula being imposed are damaging and destructive to the lives of children."