

CITY



Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

At Patrick Henry School in East Harlem yesterday, Gov. George E. Pataki signed a bill giving the New York mayor control of the school system.

As Bloomberg Takes Over Schools, Pataki Takes Center Stage

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER

Although he played a fairly limited, behind-the-scenes role in creating legislation that gives control of New York City's schools to the mayor, Gov. George E. Pataki seized the spotlight yesterday by signing the bill into law, with a flourish.

"Today we sweep aside those bureaucratic defenders of the status quo," Mr. Pataki said at a bill-signing ceremony at the Patrick Henry School in East Harlem, "and allow our children and their education to be the only priority for the people of New York City in our educational system."

The governor's signature came after several months of intense negotiations among Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and others.

Mr. Pataki's involvement came mostly at the end, when Mr. Bloomberg was chafing under pressure

from Mr. Silver, who in turn had conflicts with Joseph L. Bruno, the State Senate majority leader, over the language of the bill. Mr. Pataki kept both sides talking, said his chief spokesman, Michael McKeon.

"We wanted this to be a governor's bill," said Mr. McKeon, whose boss is running for a third term as governor. "It was something the governor has been fighting for for years."

Mr. Silver, when asked if he was disappointed that the bill-signing ceremony had become the governor's event, said somewhat forlornly, "Well that comes with the job of being governor."

Under the new law, the mayor has the authority to hire and fire the schools chancellor, who in turn will have control over the system's superintendents. The Board of Education will be expanded from 7 to 13 members, with the mayor appointing 8, and its powers will be greatly

diminished. The law also calls for the abolition of the city's 32 community school boards and the appointment of a 20-member task force to devise a replacement for those boards. It would have to pass muster with the Justice Department to make sure it did not diminish the power of minority voters.

Later, in his own news conference, Mr. Bloomberg gave a few hints of his goals for the school system, beginning with a search for a chancellor that he said would be finished before school begins in the fall. The mayor, who likes to place a razor focus on one aspect of an issue and not be distracted, said he would also concentrate on picking his appointees to the new board.

The mayor did add, however, that he would push to create a voice mail system for parents to check on their children's progress, something he proposed during his campaign for

mayor. He also said he hoped to get more from the teachers in the next round of contract negotiations, and give more power to principals.

"The next time that we come to negotiate a contract," he said, "I hope to be able to show you a system that is getting better and working and that will give the mayor and the city an awful lot more muscle in getting the changes that we think are necessary to continue the progress."

Mr. Bloomberg said he was undaunted by the task of overhauling the troubled school system.

"I did spend a little bit of money for the opportunity," he joked, adding: "If you want to do easy things where you can't fail and don't run any risks, I think the satisfaction and contribution are low. If you want to take on things that everybody says are impossible but everybody agrees we desperately need, that's the great challenge."