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Ray Cortines Must Be Doing Something Right

What a difference a year makes. Last spring, Mayor Rudy Giuliani tried to run Schools Chancellor Ray Cortines out of town. Last week, Cortines chose not to join a demonstration against school budget cuts and was criticized by teachers, principals and Board of Education president Carol Grosser for his reluctance to confront the mayor. The newspapers piled on, emphasizing Cortines' absence while almost ignoring the more than 8,000 protesters from all parts of the city. In just one year, Cortines has managed to offend the mayor, principals, union leaders everyone except the schoolchildren. This guy must be doing something right.

To understand the Board of Education, it's essential to understand that no single person can control everything that occurs in the 1,100 schools, which house more than I million students and 100,000 employees. And, with about three-fourths of the \$8-billion school budget mandated by union contracts, federal judges, the state legislature and debt service, it's no wonder New York City regularly chews up and spits out chancellors. But a chancellor who cares about education can make a difference since the other key players the unions, community boards and local politicians care more about themselves than about kids.

As a champion of public education, Cortines Fills a serious void in a city where the cops and low property taxes rank higher on the political agenda. In fact, politics continually undermines the educational process: At the community board level, superintendents are often forced to pick unqualified but politically connected principals; and at the state level, Assembly Democrats prefer to protect patronage-ridden local services rather than city schools.

Enter Ray Cortines, a non-New Yorker if there ever was one. He's civilized, does not crave media attention and is willing to take on real issues. Cortines is courageously challenging the enormous cost of special education, which drains money from classrooms for average public school students. And in an era when the federal government is abandoning science education, Cortines has insisted that high school students take Regents'-level math and science courses.

That's quite a contrast with previous school chancellors. Admittedly, he lacks Frank Macchiarola's political savvy, Tony Alvarado's zest for innovation, Richard Green's charisma or Joe Fernandez' pugnacity. But in less then two years, Cortines has emptied the bureaucrats from 110 Livingston Street, brought in a talented business leader, Barry Sullivan, to straighten out the budget, and quieted the noisy Board of Education, which no longer meddles in the day-to-day life of the chancellor.

The school system's problem is not a lack of leadership but the failure of politicians to recognize that cuts in school spending will undermine the city's economy and long-term

competitiveness. We now have a schools chancellor who is not in anybody's hip pocket. Nevertheless, even a strong chancellor cannot overcome the political abandonment of the public schools. The leaders of the city and state believe that tax cuts create jobs, but what happens if they are wrong and we get the worst of both worlds: no new jobs and no skilled labor? If that happens, by 1997, education will replace crime as the critical issue facing the city. Do we really have to kill our public schools in order to save them?

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