

Cortines Postpones District Restructuring

By Craig McGuire

By announcing that a restructuring of School District 75 would be postponed by one year, New York City Schools Chancellor Ramon Cortines headed off an imminent major protest rally.

Outraged at the chancellor's proposed changes, parents, teachers and students of District 75, which provides direct instruction for 18,500 students with special needs, had planned a massive demonstration at the central school board headquarters at 110 Livingston Street.

The unexpected March 1 release of the "District 75/ Citywide Programs Proposed Reorganization Plan" initially caught teachers and parents off-guard, but brought an immediate fury of outraged protest down upon Cortines.

The agitation was vocalized repeatedly by parents and teachers of District 75 at town hall meetings held in all five boroughs.

Essentially, the plan proposes administrative decentralization and a restructuring of services in the areas of special education school programs, home and hospital instruction, and out-of-city programs.

Cortines announced the postponement at the annual spring convention of the

United Federation of Teachers.

Dave Cohen, one of the chief organizers of the Committee to Save the Programs for Children Within District 75, addressed Cortines at a public forum in early May.

"After speaking with him directly and reasonably I decided to call off the protest rally, convinced that he would explore new avenues of streamlining, budget cutting, [and] cost effectiveness, with our input," added Cohen, a Homebound Instruction teacher in District 75.

"The article that you ran in your paper had a great deal to do with helping bring Cortines to the table," added Cohen.

On May 9, this newspaper reported on the impending protest and the outrage tearing through school board meetings throughout the city.

"Members of this union, parents, and others in the community have brought issues to my attention," said Cortines. "I want to further listen to teachers and others that are involved in special education."

"We have finally made peace with Cortines and the Board of Education," said Cohen. "This would have been a big protest. We were

estimating at least 10,000 people including buses of handicapped children from as far as Long Island."

According to Cohen, the committee had enlisted the support of parents, parent groups, children with and without special needs, teachers, Actors Equity for AIDS, truck drivers labor sympathizers, AIDS (ACT-UP) sufferers and their advocates, cancer victims and their allies.

According to Cortines, "I have informed the Board of Education that I want to wait until 1995 to implement the plan of reorganization."

Angered that they had not been included in the drafting of the proposal, teachers and parents of District 75 urged Cortines to initially adopt the proposed changes in a scaled-down pilot format.

At the convention, Cortines called for the establishment, by this September, of pilot programs in three of the city's 32 community school districts, to prepare for the full decentralization of District 75.

"I am satisfied that the integrity of programs like Home Instruction, and others in District 75," said Cohen, "will now be protected and therefore have called off the parent groups, etc. This has not been easy."