

Visit to Island is bittersweet

Cortines looks back on 'the wonderful times' as Island educators list his strengths, accomplishments

LAURA D'ANGELO
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Schools Chancellor Ramon Cortines attended only one graduation during his two years at the helm of the nation's largest school system: Yesterday at the Angerford School.

"I thought it appropriate, at this day and at this point in my career that I'm with people who care about you, you care about the young people of New York," Cortines told graduates with severe disabilities, their

parents and teachers.

Cortines made the remarks a day after his resignation letter was made public. The chancellor offered no explanation for his departure, but many people believed he was battle-weary from his constant scrapes with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

During an interview following his remarks, the chancellor said he hopes his successor finds "the strength and the talent that I found among the teaching ranks, the leadership of principals and the involvement with parents."

"This is a wonderful system and the New York people are wonderful," Cortines said. "I will always remember only the wonderful times I've had there."

The chancellor refused to discuss his reasons for leaving, or comment on his relationship with the mayor. "I have no regrets," he said, repeating the words con-

tained in his resignation letter.

"He's a very strong man," said Borough President Guy V. Molinari, who followed Cortines to the podium during the ceremony. "I was absolutely flabbergasted to see that he showed up."

Staten Islanders, who have grown familiar with Cortines, were saddened by his departure.

"He's been in this district more than the last several chancellors combined," said Island District Schools Superintendent Christy Cugini. "He was a man of integrity and a man of his word. When people called him and he said 'I'll get back to you in the afternoon,' he would get back to them in the afternoon."

James Chin, the vice chairman of the Staten Island Community School Board, said the chancellor was "very good to Staten Island."

"But it may not have too much of an impact because we have a mayor that's very pro-Staten Island," he said.

Even adversaries like Pat Miller, the founder of the Staten Island Parent Coalition to Preserve District 75, were impressed by the chancellor's tireless work habits and his willingness to listen from parents.

Mrs. Miller and the chancellor were philosophically opposed; she was committed to keeping special education programs segregated, while the chancellor had been moving toward integrating them.

"Still, he was one of the best chancellors that we ever had. He's a fine man, responsive and a true teacher," said Mrs. Miller who often talked to Cortines when he answered his office phone at 6 a.m.

Republican Councilman Vito Fossella Jr., a member of the Council Education Committee, said he would "like to see Cortines stay, but I respect his decision."

"I was a fan of Ramon Cortines," he said. "But the problem is that while there may be pockets of excellence in the school system ... it appears there need to be substantive changes so children don't suffer."

Board President Carol Gresser said she would meet with board

members to discuss the next in the search for a chancellor.

Cortines' \$195,000 contract renewed for two years by board in December of Giuliani's objections. It expires June 1997.

A clause in his contract allowed him to leave without penalty, according to Cortines' spokesman John Beckman.

Sources said that the board might consider Gerald N. Tirozzi, who was the top contender for the chancellor spot in 1993.

The Connecticut commissioner of education for eight years, Tirozzi is a professor at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. He could not be reached for comment yesterday.

PLEASE SEE VISIT,
PAGE A 3