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Building Plan For Schools Passes, Barely

Board Consensus Fades As Giuliani and Levy Vie

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS and YILU ZHAO

Just three days ago, Schools Chancellor Harold O. Levy put forward a plan for building and repairing schools that seemed assured of being easily approved by the Board of Education. But in the sometimes inscrutable world of school politics, nothing is ever sure.

Late Thursday, on the eve of the vote, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani made a last-minute push to persuade the board to approve the construction of a new middle school in Staten Island. But Mr. Levy refused, saying that building a school there would take away one planned for Queens, which is severely overcrowded.

By yesterday morning, the consensus of board members had evaporated, and in a testy session, the spending plan was approved, but by only a 4-to-3 majority. Mr. Giuliani's two appointees and the representative for Staten Island, a strong part of the mayor's Republican political base, voted against it, while the representatives of Queens, the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn voted for it. As the outcome became clear, board members, Mr. Levy and a deputy mayor angrily lashed out at one another.

Ninfa Segarra, the board president and one of the mayor's two appointees, supported Mr. Levy's plan on Wednesday, but switched sides yesterday. She accused the chancellor of cutting a politically motivated deal that allowed Manhattan and the Bronx to restore pet projects, while going "out of his way to punish Staten Island."

Mr. Levy, speaking after the vote, denied that his plan was political. "You have to make a decision that you can sleep in peace with," he said. "I've got to look out for all children. Inevitably, someone is going to feel he is shortchanged."

The vote came after 24 hours of intense jockeying among Mr. Levy, Mr. Giuliani and the board members.

The plan Mr. Levy put forward on Wednesday was an attempt to plug a $2.3-billion gap by shifting the construction of about a third of the 32 schools the Board of Education had planned to build by 2004 to the next five-year plan, and deferring all but the most urgent repairs. School construction projects were preserved based on need, with Queens high schools, the most overcrowded, at the top of the list. By the same token, however, Queens had to give up the most proposed schools — five in all, including the proposed Public School 263 in District 29, which had found a site and was ready to be bid on.

Brooklyn and Manhattan also had to sacrifice schools. Staten Island had only one proposed school on the list, Intermediate School 43, which would have housed 947 students and was deferred to the next five-year plan.

Aides to Mr. Levy said that he received confirmation on Wednesday that the City Council was providing $150 million in cash it had promised some time ago. Mr. Levy was able to use nearly $70 million of that to free up money in his original plan. He provided $35 million to the Manhattan representative, Irving S. Hamer, to renovate and lease space for a new high school, to be determined, in upper Manhattan.

Mr. Levy also provided $30 million to renovate P.S. 31, a school building in the Bronx that is a landmark but is uninhabitable. The school is a pet project of the Bronx

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