

Parents, students, teachers rally to save unique program at Dewey HS

NEW YORK CITY — Three thousand angry parents, students and teachers of the city's first experimental high school, John Dewey HS — located in the Bensonhurst-Coney Island section of Brooklyn, at 50 Ave. X and Stillwell Ave. — held a demonstration at the Board of Education headquarters, 110 Livingston St., Brooklyn on Dec. 19, to protest massive budget cuts, which the group says will effectively destroy the highly acclaimed school.

The main thrust of the demonstration was an all-out effort to save the quality, integrated education going on at John Dewey. Among the many major speakers were George Altomare, UFT vice president for academic high schools; State Senator Albert Lewis (D-Brooklyn), Assemblyman Stephen Solari (D-Brooklyn) and Frank Barbara (R-Brooklyn), Councilwoman Ruth Lerner (L-Brooklyn) and Councilman-at-large Ken Haber (L-Brooklyn), and John Dewey student leaders Deva Tucker, Mitch Gilbert and Stena Taylor.

Altomare reviewed the history and significance of the new experimental school and said the Board "has watered-down a fine program to death." He pointed out that 9th graders have been denied independent study for which the school is famous; that there has been a serious threat to free choice of courses by students; that the individual student-teacher relationship is being seriously harmed and other dangers imposed by the budget cuts. (See Co-President Albert Shanker's column, "Frustration at John Dewey HS . . ." on page 13 of the Dec. 17 issue of THE NEW YORK TEACHER.)

"The Dewey demonstration in education," Altomare said, "shows that society is not just a number of in-



Students, parents and teachers protested budget cuts for John Dewey HS at demonstration at Board of Educa-

tion headquarters Dec. 19. All-out effort is being made to save the esteemed experimental high school.

(Photo by Sam Reits)

there are many who fear that success will spread."

Altomare posed the following questions to the demonstrators: Will you fight to keep your educational free choice; will you fight to maintain the individual attention and independent study opportunities; will you fight to keep your teachers so that each student is known as a person and not just an educational cog in the Board of Education machine? Are we going to stick to this fight until we win? Are we students, teachers, parents and administrators going to stick together?

Al Merker, chapter chairman and coordinator of the rally, told THE NEW YORK TEACHER that "The rally clearly showed that we have quality, integrated education at Dewey."

"We not only have the best education, but there is no racial strife and there is such a beautiful relationship between teachers and students and parents. We mean to save Dewey HS," he said.

Demonstration leaders charged that when the Board set up a rigid city-wide formula to reduce the number of teachers in each school, it completely failed to allow for the unique nature of the highly productive Dewey Independent Study Program.

Each seven-week cycle, an average of 1,300 students register in the DISK (Dewey Independent Study Kit) program, and assume total responsibility for completing a course. Thus, 1,300 students, the equivalent of nine teaching positions, are receiving an education without utilizing classroom space. However, they are closely supervised by teachers on an individual basis and must complete the same amount of work as students in class. Additionally, due to these cuts, students now in the school will not be able to gradu-

ate on schedule as classes they need have been disbanded.

Further cuts, threatened by the Board, will completely destroy the effectiveness of this highly successful experiment, demonstrators said.

When the Board announced the opening of Dewey in 1969, it was hailed as the most innovative and exciting educational alternative experiment in the country.

John Dewey is a collective effort of the United Federation of Teachers, the Board of Education and the community, and has continued to garner enormous favorable publicity. (The most recent visitor to the school — Yigael Allon, Israeli education minister — stated he was so favorably impressed with the Dewey idea that he was returning to Israel determined to carry the Dewey concept into fruition there. Israel has already announced plans for the construction of a Dewey-type school.)

John Dewey HS has a volunteer student body representative of a cross-section of Brooklyn's students. The school is demographically balanced and draws its students from throughout the borough. Unique Dewey programs include computerized modular scheduling — five, seven-week cycles comprise the school year. The sixth cycle takes place during the summer and is optional. Students may complete their high school program in two, three, four or five years. Individual progress in each cycle depends solely upon mastery of prescribed course objectives. A portion of every student's daily program is scheduled for independent study. The school day is eight hours long, and students can select their courses from over 200 offerings that include science fiction as literature, environmental design, film making, advanced sculpture, bi-lingual typewriting,

data processing, the Bible as literature, journalism workshop, modern dance, architectural drafting, general electricity, computer math, calculus, madrigal singing, wind instrument repair, sociology, ethnic studies, microbiology and marine biology. These are in addition to traditional course offerings.

The unusual "four-in-one" program allows students to spend four days in class and one day working in the field of their interest of specialization. (Some students have elected to work in museums, hospitals, theaters, etc.)

One of the unique aspects of the Dewey experiment is that no numerical grades are used. Student's work is evaluated on the basis of Mastery (M) and Retention for Reinforcement (R). An R means the student has not mastered a given phase of work and will be scheduled to either repeat it or take a supplementary offering. However, with the flexibility of a seven-week cycle, the student faces only — if repeating — seven weeks of work and not, as in the traditional high school, six months. Follow-up for students receiving R grades is handled on a one-to-one basis via a "prescription form" presented by the teacher registering the R grade.

Demonstration leaders stressed that the hallmark of Dewey's success is the absence of tensions in the school and the unity among parents, students and faculty, which is evidenced in their determination to preserve the experiment in the face of bureaucratic indifference.

They feel that John Dewey HS is a uniquely successful educational alternative and say that in a time when the viability of the urban public school is being seriously questioned, it would be absurd to destroy the nation's most successful experiment.



George Altomare

dividuals huddled together in an organization, but that society is an organic union of individuals."

The UFT spokesman told the demonstrators that "you have succeeded because you have removed the focus on failure and set the spotlight on student success and mastery of learning. The problem is that no success can really be cheap. Dewey's success demands a greater investment in public education and