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Bill would separate politics, school board

By CARL CAMPANILE
ADVANCE ALBANY BUREAU

ALBANY — Legislation that would bar community school board members from seeking another elected office unless they resign their school board position was advanced yesterday by Assemblyman Eric Vitaliano.

The bill has political overtones on Staten Island. Vitaliano, D-Dongan Hills, introduced the measure only four months after defeating Republican Jerry Cammarata, an elected member of the Island Community School Board.

Vitaliano acknowledged he is pursuing the legislation after a parents group complained about Cammarata seeking public office while sitting on the school board. But he insisted his backing of the measure was not a swipe at Cammarata.

Cammarata disagreed. He said he believed Vitaliano's motivation for the bill was political revenge and predicted it wouldn't pass the Legislature.

"Members should not use the board as a stepping stone to higher political office. Board members have an ethical obligation to remain non-partisan so that they can serve as an advocate for all families in our school system," Vitaliano said.

"This is nothing more than revenge. There's no question in my mind."

— Jerry Cammarata
Community School Board

"Aspiring politicians seeking to advance their own careers will have to find another vehicle for their political grandstanding. The bill will place the school boards off-limits."

He also expressed concern that school employees and others would feel pressured to support a board member's candidacy and contribute to his campaign. The names of Island school officials did surface in Cammarata's campaign filings.

Vitaliano, a Democrat-Conservative who trounced Cammarata with 72 percent of the vote last fall, said the bill is a "logical extension" of the 1988 "Serrano-Vitaliano" law prohibiting Board of Education employees, as well as elected officials, from sitting on school boards.

Vitaliano stressed it was the Parents Action Committee for Education — not he — who initially raised the issue of Cammarata's dual role, and denied the bill was a political hit at his Republican opponent. "Is it appropriate? I think it is," he said of the ban.

But Cammarata called the bill "absolutely ludicrous" during an interview last night. "This is nothing more than revenge. There's no question in my mind," he said.

"He's allowing his personal vengeance to interfere with good judgment. It was interesting that I was the only one on the school board who ran for public office. There are too many things here that end up in a neat package."

Cammarata also described as absurd trying to ban politics from the educational process. School board members and educators, for example, have to use the political process to get state funding in Albany or legislation approved.

Any such ban, if adopted into law, should apply to all elected officials, not just school board members, he said, since "we are all public officials and we are all serving the needs of our constituencies."

One political leader also opposed Vitaliano's "Cammarata" bill as nonsense and thinks it's unconstitutional. "I don't see the conflict," said Carl Grillo, the Island's Liberal Party chairman. "It sounds like he's doing it because the guy ran against him."

Grillo added: "It's no different than someone in public office running for higher office. I'm sure he would want to see (such a ban) signed into law."