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Ed Board Denies Planning Secret Meeting on Vouchers

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Brushing off charges that they were planning to hold a secret meeting today to discuss school vouchers in violation of state law, Board of Education officials insisted yesterday they were not going to break any rules.

Jerry Cammarata, the board's Staten Island member, said the meeting would focus on "personnel issues" raised by Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew's threat to quit over the mayor's voucher proposal and not on the voucher policy itself.

The state's Open Meeting Law requires public discussion of policy matters, but allows closed-door talks about personnel matters.

Officials said they would restrict the talk to questions about Crew's "employment," stemming from his heated debate with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani over whether to experiment with publicly financed vouchers for private education.

Crew threatened to quit last week if Giuliani persuaded the Board of Education to approve a voucher program, but the two mended fences on Monday.

"We're absolutely not going to discuss vouchers in executive session," Cammarata said yesterday.

School officials were quoted over the last few days saying the board would discuss the voucher issue in its regularly scheduled executive session today. Yesterday, Gene Russianoff, an attorney with the New York Public Interest Research Group who helped write the state Open Meeting Law, wrote to the board urging it not to meet.

Discussing vouchers behind closed doors, Russianoff said, would violate the law and "deny the public the opportunity to hear debate of an important issue."

But Cammarata said the discussion today would focus "purely on the personnel" matter raised by the chancellor's threat to quit and therefore would not violate the law.