

Molinari swears in Community School Board

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A new team of Community School Board members was sworn in yesterday during a public ceremony in Borough Hall.

About 40 guests, including District 31 Superintendent Christy Cugini; Staten Island's representative to the Board of Education, Jerry Cammarata; and Burton Sacks, chief executive for community affairs, outreach and monitoring at the Board of Education, attended the afternoon event.

Borough President Guy V. Molinari did the honors, officially confirming eight of the nine members elected or re-elected in May. Taking the oath of office were Salvatore Ballarino, Eleanor Conforti, Carmel (Bunny) Reddington, Dr. Carrie Robinson, Eugene Prisco, Sean O'Sullivan, Dr. Syng Kwak and Barry Kaufman. The ninth member, Olivia Brennan of West Brighton, is currently hospitalized and was sworn in privately.

The members will serve a three-year term beginning today. They were elected from a field of 19 on May 18. Less than 3 percent of Staten Island's registered voters participated in the election, which is conducted using paper ballots and an arcane system of tabulation known as the single transferable vote.

Despite the seemingly backward nature of the election process and the lack of voter interest, Molinari told those gathered that the job of a community school board member is still relevant.

"In a society like ours, it needs to be said that we have people like these willing to step forward ... and try to do right by our school children," said Molinari.

Cugini said he was looking forward "to an excellent working relationship. We have to make sure all the young people in this community are positively influenced by our educational system. That's an obligation you've accepted. If we're successful, our community is improved."

Cammarata extended congratulations on behalf of Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew and urged the school board members not to be daunted by recent changes in school governance that many believe severely diluted the powers of local school boards while at the same time strengthening central administrative control.

"It's actually more responsibility. You're actually auditors, managing assets in this district," said Cammarata.

Sacks noted that with 40,000 students, District 31 ranks only behind the school system of Buffalo in size, if the rest of the city's schools were not counted. "This is a big responsibility," he told the new school board members. "But I know you're up to the job."

Kaufman, of Pleasant Plains, embarking on his first term as a school board member, said he was "excited, energetic and hopeful for the future of the school district. I'm looking forward to making a difference."

West Brighton resident Prisco, who is also a first-time board member, said there needs to be less emphasis on hiring supervisory personnel and more on hiring teachers. He said he is also looking to establish an alternative school at the intermediate grade level for disruptive students. "We will try to move as quick as we can," he said.

Mrs. Conforti, who lives in Great Kills and is the senior member of the school board with more than 20 years of service, said the job continues to be "a challenge." She said that changes in governance have required her to look at the position in a different light that she has come to realize can be equally positive.

Mrs. Reddington, an Annadale resident who begins her third term, noted that although "we are such a different group of people," she expects to be able to collaborate effectively.

Her colleague Ballarino, who lives in Westerleigh and has served on the school board for six years, agreed. "As long as the team is together and has a common goal, the job is a lot easier," he said.

Dr. Robinson, who lives in Clifton and is beginning her second term on the school board, told those gathered that she pledges herself "to academic excellence. On the eve of the millennium, we need to provide a first-class education for every child in the district."

Newcomer O'Sullivan from Grant City said the school board enjoys "great relationships" with the community at large. He also cited Molinari's "excellent leadership."

Dr. Kwak, a Richmond Valley resident, who begins his first term, said that as a first-generation immigrant, "I am extremely happy to be in a position to serve the public. We can't just sit there doing nothing. Children are our future. We have to invest."