

Angry Islanders: We had no input on chancellor

■ Members of the local school community feel left out of process they say was strictly political

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The surprise selection last week of Harold O. Levy as interim schools chancellor disappointed Staten Islanders who are active in the public education community and set off another round of criticism about how the Island is represented at the Board of Education.

It's not that Islanders objected to the Citigroup attorney who finally got the nod to stand in as educational caretaker of 1.1 million youngsters for the next few months.

Rather, they voiced concern about the lack of local consultation and the political haggling that drove the process.

"It's like we don't exist," said Community School Board President Eleanor Conforti.

"It's always political. I don't want to get involved in central board stuff. I have no control over it," said Community School Board member Salvatore Bal-larino.

"It's a problem. I wish they would come down to the level of

schoolteachers, students and administrators," said Anne Marie Caminiti, president of the Staten Island Federation of Parent-Teacher Associations.



Cammarata

"It's so politicized. They [board mem-

bers] generally don't feel they have to pay attention to what the community wants," noted Julia Brusco, vice president of the New Dorp High School PTA and former co-president of the Federation.

In fact, key members of the Federation said they were so incensed by the process that they have penned a letter that will be sent to Jerry Cammarata, Staten Island's representative to the Board of Education; the man

who appointed him, Borough President Guy V. Molinari; and Molinari's political ally, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani.

"We were dissatisfied that [Chancellor Rudy] Crew was not renewed and we wanted to give them some ideas on what they should do now," noted Ms. Caminiti. The letter was read at the end of the Community School Board's meeting last week and will be mailed soon, she said.

Many Island observers say they are particularly troubled by the lack of communication between Cammarata and those they believe he should be representing.

"He needs to talk to Staten Island kids, Staten Island principals, parent groups, on items of importance. A lot of this has gotten lost in the shuffle. But I don't know how he cannot do that," said Ms. Caminiti.

One school board member, who has never been in Cammarata's office at 110 Livingston St. and requested anonymity, echoed the anger of many in the schools who feel disconnected. "How does he get away with this?"

Cammarata sided with the mayor's two representatives to the Board of Education in favor of naming former MTA chairman Robert Kiley as interim chancellor. He has accused Terri Thomson, the Board of Education repre-

sentative from Queens, of bucking a promise to support Kiley, whose name she suggested, and pandering to politics.

Cammarata admits that he has rarely failed to support the positions of the mayor at the Board of Education. In fact, the only time anyone can recall is one of his earliest informal votes in 1995, when he supported an educator named Dan Domenici for chancellor on Friday and switched on Saturday to the mayor's candidate, Crew.

Cammarata chalked that flip-flop up to "political naivete" and claims that protocol and like-mindedness are the reasons he sides with Giuliani's positions, not politics.

"I have never disagreed with the philosophy of the mayor," said Cammarata. "What's been on the table the last four years has been objective and has moved the system in a more positive direction."

But Queens resident Carol Gresser, a former colleague of Cammarata's at the Board of Education, said that it is "not likely" that a representative would be in lock-step with his political mentors at all times.

"You have to be able to use your judgment, too," she said, noting that when she served at the board she met regularly — sometimes as often as once a month — with a

number of her constituents, including school board members, principals and parents.

But Cammarata counters: "My obligation is not to think that I'm so independent of mind that the ... the borough president becomes irrelevant. I'm the caretaker of the borough president at the Board of Education."

Cammarata says that Staten Islanders elect a borough president who, in turn, is enfranchised to make appointments that will move an agenda voters have indicated they support.

For his part, Molinari said, "I have never given Jerry Cammarata marching orders — or Lou DeSario or Mike Petrides [the two representatives who preceded Cammarata in his post during Molinari's tenure]."

But some doubt the borough president.

One former official said Cammarata is little more than a Molinari mouthpiece.

"That's exactly what his role is," said the official.

Cammarata "has got to play ball so Molinari gets what he wants out of the mayor," said another observer.

Others say this is not necessarily bad, except that some observers believe the borough president is not well-connected to the

mindset of the average Staten Islander.

"Guy has never been one to take into view what the parents think," said Ms. Brusco.

Molinari said that Cammarata is in touch with parents and schools and communicates with him several times a day through memos.

"I've had my differences with him, but you can't get mad at this guy and I have immense respect for him. He's a worker and there are few people who would go to the extent he does. It's unfair to suggest that he's not talked to the parents. To suggest he's not been in touch with the schools is an unfair rap," said the borough president.

Yet two months ago, at least one Federation official was angered that Cammarata apparently skipped a legislative forum on transportation and safety issues. His input would have been valuable in explaining the board's role in effecting change.

At the time, Ms. Brusco charged Cammarata was "parent-unfriendly." Cammarata later claimed he was never invited to the forum.

The one notable issue that divided Molinari and his appointee cropped up in late 1998, when Molinari blasted Cammarata for what he described as failing to forcefully communicate to Board of Ed planners the dire need for more classroom space in the borough.

When the board's capital budget proposal came out without a single new school proposed for the Island, the borough president was enraged. Cammarata declined to respond to the criticism at the time.

Molinari eventually brokered a deal with Queens Borough President Claire Shulman in which their representatives voted together on a plan that awarded both boroughs more schools, including three for the Island.