

FEBRUARY 25, 2001

Staten Island

Summer



Jerry Cammarata

High-minded or high-handed?

Jerry Cammarata, a city commissioner and Staten Island Board of Ed rep, stirs strong feelings among supporters and detractors

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ADVANCE CITY HALL BUREAU

Jerry Cammarata is the only city commissioner with his very own website — www.cammarata.com. It's a place where New Yorkers can get up close and personal with a guy wearing two hats — as the Staten Island representative to the Board of Education and commissioner of youth services.

To some the site would seem yet another extravagant flight of egotism for a man who once declared without shame that his ultimate goal in life was to become famous. But Cammarata sees the Internet as a logical extension of his work as commissioner of the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) and the Board of Education. Among the offerings: several pictures of you-know-who, a biography, several articles and excerpts from a book on parenthood Cammarata penned years back. As perhaps nothing else, the web address is symbolic of the starkly different ways Cam-

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marata is viewed in the youth services and educational communities.

To some, the 54-year-old Staten Islander is a dedicated, if somewhat flamboyant, public servant, working long hours to make sure the youth of this city get the services they need. To others, Cammarata is seen as little more than a self-promoter who has been able to parlay unquestioning loyalty to City Hall into two relatively high-profile posts he can use as stepping stones to better things to come. As commissioner he earns \$133,000-a-year; he makes \$15,000 as a Board of Education member.

"He's political and most of his decisions are made with political consequences; the number one consideration," said Pat Talaszek of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). "He's been able to secure various appointed positions through his time in the system. He operates in a completely political framework."

An invisible man?

Meanwhile, members of the Staten Island Community School Board — the panel on which Cammarata served before he was appointed to the central Board of Education — complain that Cammarata, for all his public visibility, has been the invisible man as far as they're concerned, never attending a single board meeting in the past six years.

Moreover, they charge, Cammarata never communicates with members directly, forcing them to obtain information through other sources ranging from school principals to Borough Hall. Cammarata counters that he need not physically be present at school board meetings to know what's going on since he gets written reports on the sessions.

He also insists that his office makes sure board members, parents and others with an interest in the education system routinely get whatever information they seek from his office. "If there's anything any board member needs from my office, it's available to them," Cammarata said. "There's been no question denied them."

Borough President Guy V. Molinari, the man who named Cammarata to the central Board, agreed with his appointee, saying it is not essential that Cammarata be present at local board meetings.

"He doesn't have to be there," Molinari explained. "That's not as important as doing his job. And the man does extraordinary work for this school district and for my office. He knows the issues here very well. And he has a close relationship with Staten Island Schools Superintendent Christy Cugini."

But board members say the monthly meetings — which draw parents, educators and others evening at the Petrides educational complex in Sunnyside — are the perfect forum for a central Board member to get a hands-on feel for what's happening in the district. Chairman Eleanor Conforti said the session air the top educational issues of the month — issues ranging from curricula to transportation services. Updated reports of various board committees are also presented and discussed.

Minimal interaction with parents

"Jerry Cammarata needs to hear directly from us and we need to hear directly from him," said board member Gene Prisco, chairman of the curriculum committee. "Right now he has little or no interacting with the educational community here. For example, his interaction with parents and parents' groups has been marginal or minimal."

"In this area his tenure has been wanting. I'm not suggesting that at some other level he hasn't met his obligation. For example, it wouldn't be right to say he hasn't been active in pushing for more schools for Staten Island. But his relationship with the educational community here has been woeful."

Other members of the central Board, including outgoing president William Thompson and Queens representative Terri Thomson, agree with Prisco, saying physically sitting down with local board members is a good way of staying in touch with local educational issues.

"William Thompson regularly gets feedback from community school board meetings," said Gail Horowitz an aide. "He also regularly sits down with superintendents." Leslie Esters, a spokesperson for Terri Thomson, the Queens representative, said Thomson routinely attends school board meetings in the district.

A former longtime Staten Island representative to the central Board and four-term president of that body, James P. Regan, recognized the importance of



Jerry Cammarata left is congratulated by Borough President Guy V. Molinari after he was named the new city commissioner of youth services.

ADVANCE FILE PHOTO

going to local board meetings. He also routinely visited schools and kept a close relationship with the parent-teachers group.

Local board members here say that several years back Cammarata opted to cut them off from direct communication with his office — a charge he flatly denies — when they would not agree to go through a liaison Cammarata had designated. Said one member: "We didn't feel we should have to go through any liaison to reach him. We didn't see why we couldn't just contact his office directly when necessary."

Prisco said: "We only see him at official functions like a ribbon cutting for a new school. My only question is how can he really know what's going on in education here if he's not in contact with the key players. He needs to get the thoughts, feelings and opinions of constituent groups to understand what's going on."

Another board member, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said: "Though he came from the school board, he treats us in a high-handed fashion. He cut off any communication more than five years ago."

Complaints from the PTA

Anne Marie Caminito, president of the Staten Island Federation of PTAs, has also complained that Cammarata does not make himself available to her group.

When Ms. Caminito accused Cammarata of ignoring the group's meeting held in 1999, Cammarata, fired off a nasty letter, blasting her for trying to use him as a "scapegoat" for her frustrations over a school transportation issue.

Cammarata flatly accused her of being "selfish and narrow minded." Ms. Caminito said she was shocked by the letter.

"It was a horrible letter," she said. One local school board source said Cammarata is not "the kind of person you want to cross. You've got to walk carefully."

Cammarata, who holds a doctorate in speech pathology, describes himself as a dedicated educator who is now in a perfect position to join two related programs — youth services and education.

He was appointed to the central board in August 1995 by Molinari. Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, whose administration folds its tent at the end of this year, named Cammarata to head up the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) in June of last year.

"I have the ability to see the total scope of educating the child," Cammarata said. "This is seamless, not disjointed. We can see it as a whole. It is vitally

important that schools know they must make out-reach to the community."

Long days, hard work, no complaints

In wearing two hats, Cammarata says he's working 12 hours a day.

While at the DYCD he is in constant phone contact with the Board of Education and ends up spending several days physically at the Board's downtown Brooklyn offices for meetings. The commissioner also has a third job working with city Budget Director Adam Barsky reviewing proposals for charter schools.

"I'm working harder and more diligently than ever before," Cammarata said. "And it's an absolute delight. I couldn't think of a better place to be on behalf of kids."

The main mission at DYCD has been putting in place a performance-based format for the awarding of youth service contracts — a project begun under Cammarata's two predecessors, Martin Osterreich and Violet Mitchell.

Under the new format, community-based groups must be able to objectively show they are effectively delivering services. "We've got to justify the dollars we're spending," said Cammarata of the \$40 million agency. "Individual groups must be able to show they perform — to validate the work they're doing. We don't want a situation where somebody says they've got a good program but can't say why."

While both City Hall and Borough Hall describe Cammarata's work as top draw — Molinari calls Cammarata a gifted, bright and hardworking "problem-solver," and Giuliani praises the Islander's "vast experience as an educator" — some in the youth services community say they've been overwhelmed by Cammarata's tenure, charging that the Islander was installed in the post as "payoff" for carrying water from the administration as a central Board member.

Job & payoff or promotion?

One official of a citywide youth group, speaking on condition of anonymity, said: "Everybody knows that Jerry Cammarata has no expertise in this area. The job was a payoff." The official added that "youth services is being eviscerated under the Giuliani administration."

Meanwhile, Michelle Yanche of the Neighborhood Family Services Coalition described Cammarata as a caretaker put in charge simply to preside over a broad strategy to cut youth services. "The only exception to this is the Beacon program," she said.

Gail Nayowitz of the Citizens Children said Cammarata is "not trying to do a new vision for youth services the way the mayor does."

Eileen Connell of the Education Watchdog group, said Cammarata a member of the central Board could be counted on to vote the way and who was not known for originating much," said Connell doing even less, even though he tion.

She pointed to the fact that Board's liaison to the Big Five — of the state's five largest cities.

"He could be doing more to develop a national strategy for this state," a participation. He shows up. But Island member to the board shuttles. He's just not pro-active enough.

But Molinari described his appointment as a Board member. "I Molinari said. "I get faxes from times a day. We get a whole lot of him. He works late in trying to do it's wonderful to see someone who challenge of such a system." heading up DYCD is perfect for "you can't separate youth services of the schools. They're interrelated.

"And Jerry Cammarata is all as Police Commissioner Benjamin the Police Department," Mol

Giuliani said Cammarata "hearing our children ... his experience effort to protect and nurture our tion, his knowledge of New York grant communities will allow him allocate resources to empower to achieve self-sufficiency."

A history of stunts

In his earlier years, Cammarata known for a series of stunts that singing on subways buses and donut-eating contests. In 1971, for eating 21 donuts in seven minutes.

He was also entered into the World Records for having the telephone books — a total of 600, had small parts in "The Godfather" known movie "Happiness of Life

Once during a singing marathon in 1972 — he sang 380 songs in 46 minutes flatly told a reporter his main accomplishment.

Along the way Cammarata has other milestones. He authored a — "The Fun Book of Fatherhood" turned into a 1982 television movie. In 1973 he became the first male to be granted a four-year paternity Board of Education.

"I guess the word for Jerry is one: youth service provider. He ground."

Right now, as the Giuliani's down, Cammarata is apparently had his run-ins with both his and Giuliani.

In December 1998, Molinari's Board appointee for being underfunded was parceled out for making sure this borough got its At the time Molinari also blasted

The borough president faulted Cammarata for communicating the borough's Board of Education planners.

Giuliani took Cammarata to 1995 when the central Board was getting his signals crossed — as consider Suffolk County education for schools chancellor, replaced Domenech was not Giuliani's that abundantly clear during Cammarata and Molinari at Gracie

Though sources said Giuliani did not act — in a later vote Cammarata down on Domenech — Cammarata of the Gracie Mansion meeting "clarify" his (Cammarata's) then