

***Before the School Ethics Commission***  
***Docket No.: C14-25***  
***Decision on Probable Cause***

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**John Robert Baird,  
Complainant**

**v.**

**Mark Schonewise, Stephanie Cosentino, Kristina Christian,  
Anand Acharya and Lynn Starks  
East Greenwich Township Board of Education, Gloucester County,  
Respondents**

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**I. Procedural History**

The above-captioned matter arises from a Complaint that was filed with the School Ethics Commission (Commission) on March 20, 2025,<sup>1</sup> by John Robert Baird (Complainant), alleging that Mark Schonewise (Respondent Schonewise), Stephanie Cosentino (Respondent Cosentino), Kristina Christian (Respondent Christian), Anand Acharya (Respondent Acharya) and Lynn Starks (Respondent Starks) (collectively, Respondents), members of the East Greenwich Township Board of Education (Board), violated the School Ethics Act (Act), *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-21 *et seq.* More specifically, the Complaint avers that all Respondents violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(a) and Respondents Schonewise and Christian violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(c) of the Code of Ethics for School Board Members (Code). Respondents filed a Written Statement on April 29, 2025.

The parties were notified by correspondence dated October 21, 2025, that the above-captioned matter would be discussed by the Commission at its meeting on October 28, 2025, in order to make a determination regarding probable cause. Following its discussion on October 28, 2025, the Commission adopted a decision at its meeting on November 25, 2025, finding that there are insufficient facts and circumstances pled in the Complaint and in the Written Statement to lead a reasonable person to believe that the Act was violated as alleged in the Complaint.

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<sup>1</sup> On February 10, 2025, Complainant filed a deficient Complaint; however, on March 20, 2025, Complainant cured all defects and filed an Amended Complaint that was deemed compliant with the requirements detailed in *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-6.3.

## II. Summary of the Pleadings

### A. *The Complaint*

Complainant maintains that on December 3, 2024, Respondent Schonewise (Board President) sent an email from his Board email account to all of the Board members, except for Complainant, creating a quorum. According to Complainant, in the email, Respondent Schonewise expressed his “dislike with” Complainant “due to them exercising their rights as a private citizen and expressing their opinion and sharing information regarding two-district employees who have launched campaigns to attack that board member for expressing views shared by themselves and other [Township] residents.” Complainant further maintains Respondent Schonewise also requested responses from the email group to which four Board members replied with their “wishes or voiced their personal opinion,” one Board member replied and refused to take part in the matter, and two Board members did not reply at all.

With the above in mind, and in Count 1, Complainant asserts Respondent Schonewise violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)*, because he sent an email to a quorum of the Board and requested a response in violation of the Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA), also known as the “Sunshine Law.” Per Complainant, the email qualified as a meeting and was not advertised, which violated OPMA. Further, Complainant contends Respondent Schonewise violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)*, because he “took official action and sent the email to collect votes or opinions from Board members to plan an attack against a fellow Board member.”

In Count 2, Complainant maintains on December 6, 2024, Respondent Acharya replied to the email stating, “I strongly believe we – as a [B]oard should publish a letter to the community that reaffirms our commitment to working with teachers, parents, and students respectively and reiterating how valued the teachers are to this school district . . . . Can we discuss it during the Executive Session, however?” Complainant also maintains that on December 15, 2024, Respondent Acharya responded to the email, stating “. . . Have we decided on a course of action regarding the Facebook posts . . . is a necessary step but am open to considering other options.” Complainant alleges that Respondent Acharya violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)*, because he replied to the email, which consisted of a quorum in violation of OPMA.

In Count 3, Complainant contends on December 4, 2024, Respondent Christian replied to the email stating, “. . . I feel he disrespects his position on the [Board] acting the way he does . . . . What the [B]oard decides to do (either way) I will stand with and stay quiet and respectful.” Complainant further contends Respondent Christian violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)*, because she replied to the email, which consisted of a quorum in violation of OPMA and also violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)*, because she did not consult with Complainant, who would be affected by her decision.

In Count 4, Complainant asserts on December 6, 2024, Respondent Consentino replied to the email stating, “My expectation is that he be removed from the [B]oard . . . .” Respondent Consentino also replied on December 5, 2024, stating, “. . . I respect what the [B]oard wants to do as a whole but I also agree that he abused his position . . . .” Complainant further asserts

Respondent Consentino violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(a), because she replied to the email, which consisted of a quorum in violation of OPMA.

In Count 5, Complainant maintains on December 6, 2024, Respondent Starks replied to the email stating, “I support the guidance and direction from legal counsel as it related to the documentation referenced in the email.” Complainant further maintains Respondent Starks violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(a), because she replied to the email, which consisted of a quorum in violation of OPMA.

## **B. *Written Statement***

Respondent Schonewise admits to the email and notes that it speaks for itself; however, he notes that he did not ask the recipients to “reply all.”

As to a violation of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(a), all Respondents assert that whether this is a violation of OPMA is not within the Commission’s jurisdiction to determine. Moreover, all Respondents deny they violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(a).

Regarding a violation of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(c), related to Respondents Schonewise and Christian, both Respondents deny the conduct and note that even if it were true, it would not violate *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(c).

Finally, Respondents offer four affirmative defenses, namely that the Superior Court, not the Commission, has jurisdiction over OPMA; even if the events are true, they do not constitute violations of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(a) and/or *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(c); the Commission does not have jurisdiction over Respondent Consentino as she was not a Board member on March 20, 2025, and therefore, was not a school official; and any OPMA complaint filed beyond the 45 day limitation, such as this one, is time barred.

## **III. *Analysis***

This matter is before the Commission for a determination of probable cause pursuant to *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-9.7. A finding of probable cause is not an adjudication on the merits but, rather, an initial review whereupon the Commission makes a preliminary determination as to whether the matter should proceed to an adjudication on the merits, or whether further review is not warranted. Pursuant to *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-9.7(a), probable cause “shall be found when the facts and circumstances presented in the complaint and written statement would lead a reasonable person to believe that the Act has been violated.”

### ***Jurisdiction of the Commission***

In reviewing the allegations in this matter, the Commission notes that its authority is limited to enforcing the Act, *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-21 *et seq.*, a set of minimum ethical standards by which all school officials must abide. In this regard, the Commission has jurisdiction only over matters arising under the Act, and it may not receive, hear, or consider any matter that does not arise under the Act, *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-1.4(a).

As to Respondent Cosentino's assertions that the Commission does not have jurisdiction due to the Complaint being filed on March 20, 2025, when Respondent Cosentino was no longer in office, the Commission finds that as the actions that are the subject of the Complaint occurred while Respondent Cosentino was in office, pursuant to *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-23*, the Commission has jurisdiction.

With the jurisdiction of the Commission in mind, to the extent that Complainant seeks a determination from the Commission that Respondents may have violated the OPMA/Sunshine Law and/or any Board policies, the Commission advises that such determinations fall beyond the scope, authority, and jurisdiction of the Commission. Although Complainant may be able to pursue a cause of action(s) in the appropriate tribunal, the Commission is not the appropriate entity to adjudicate those claims. Accordingly, those claims are dismissed.

### *Alleged Violations of the Act*

Complainant submits that Respondents violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)* and *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)*, and these provisions of the Code provide:

a. I will uphold and enforce all laws, rules and regulations of the State Board of Education, and court orders pertaining to schools. Desired changes shall be brought about only through legal and ethical procedures.

c. I will confine my board action to policy making, planning, and appraisal, and I will help to frame policies and plans only after the board has consulted those who will be affected by them.

Pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:28-6.4(a)*, a violation(s) of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)* and/or *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)* need to be supported by certain factual evidence, more specifically:

1. Factual evidence of a violation of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)* shall include a copy of a final decision from any court of law or administrative agency of this State demonstrating that Respondents failed to enforce all laws, rules and regulations of the State Board of Education, and/or court orders pertaining to schools or that Respondents brought about changes through illegal or unethical procedures.

3. Factual evidence of a violation of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)* shall include evidence that Respondents took board action to effectuate policies and plans without consulting those affected by such policies and plans, or took action that was unrelated to Respondents' duty to (i) develop the general rules and principles that guide the management of the school district or charter school; (ii) formulate the programs and methods to effectuate the goals of the school district or charter school; or (iii) ascertain the value or liability of a policy.

Following its assessment, the Commission finds that there are insufficient facts and circumstances presented in the Complaint and the Written Statement to lead a reasonable person to believe that Respondents violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)* and/or *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)*. First, as to a violation of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)*, Complainant has not produced a copy of a final decision from any court of law or administrative agency of this State demonstrating Respondents failed to enforce all laws, rules and regulations of the State Board of Education or a court order pertaining to the school as required by *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)*. Further, as to a violation of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)*, Complainant has not articulated what Board action Respondents Schonewise and Christian have taken that demonstrates Respondents took board action to effectuate policies and plans without consulting those affected by such policies and plans, or took action that was unrelated to their duty by sending or replying to an email, and therefore, a violation of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)* cannot be sustained.

Accordingly, and pursuant to *N.J.A.C. 6A:28-9.7(b)*, the Commission dismisses the alleged violations of *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(a)* and *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(c)*.

#### **IV. Decision**

In accordance with *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-29(b)*, and for the reasons detailed herein, the Commission hereby notifies Complainant and Respondents that there are insufficient facts and circumstances pled in the Complaint and in the Written Statement to lead a reasonable person to believe that the Act was violated as alleged in the Complaint and, consequently, dismisses the above-captioned matter. *N.J.A.C. 6A:28-9.7(b)*.

The within decision is a final decision of an administrative agency and, therefore, it is appealable only to the Superior Court-Appellate Division. *See, New Jersey Court Rule 2:2-3(a)*. Under *New Jersey Court Rule 2:4-1(b)*, a notice of appeal must be filed with the Appellate Division within 45 days from the date of mailing of this decision.

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Robert W. Bender, Chairperson

Mailing Date: November 25, 2025

***Resolution Adopting Decision  
in Connection with C14-25***

***Whereas***, at its meeting on October 28, 2025, the School Ethics Commission (Commission) considered the Complaint and the Written Statement submitted in connection with the above-referenced matter; and

***Whereas***, at its meeting on October 28, 2025, the Commission discussed finding that the facts and circumstances presented in the Complaint and the Written Statement would not lead a reasonable person to believe that the Act was violated, and therefore, dismissing the above-captioned matter; and

***Whereas***, at its meeting on November 25, 2025, the Commission reviewed and voted to approve the within decision as accurately memorializing its actions/findings from its meeting on October 28, 2025; and

***Now Therefore Be It Resolved***, that the Commission hereby adopts the decision and directs its staff to notify all parties to this action of its decision herein.

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Robert W. Bender, Chairperson

I hereby certify that the Resolution was duly adopted by the School Ethics Commission at its public meeting on November 25, 2025.

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Brigid C. Martens, Director  
School Ethics Commission