

***Before the School Ethics Commission***  
***Docket No.: C106-25***  
***Decision on Probable Cause***

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**Mark Sabella,**  
***Complainant***

v.

**Lanfang (Lucy) Li,**  
**Bridgewater-Raritan Board of Education, Somerset County,**  
***Respondent***

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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 October 27, 2025, by Mark Sabella (Complainant), alleging that Lanfang (Lucy) Li (Respondent), a member of the Bridgewater-Raritan 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 Respondent violated *N.J.S.A. 18A:12-24.1(f)* of the Code of Ethics for School Board Members (Code).

On December 6, 2025, Respondent filed a Written Statement, which included an allegation that the Complaint is frivolous. On December 27, 2025, Complainant filed a response to the allegation of frivolous filing.

The parties were notified by correspondence dated March 17, 2026, that the above-captioned matter would be discussed by the Commission at its meeting on March 24, 2026, to determine whether probable cause exists and whether the Complaint is frivolous. Following its discussion on March 24, 2026, the Commission adopted a decision at its meeting on April 28, 2026, 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. The Commission also adopted a decision finding the Complaint not frivolous and denying Respondent's request for sanctions.

**II. Summary of the Pleadings**

**A. *The Complaint***

According to Complainant, Respondent “distributed campaign mailers . . . which prominently featured and were paid for by Assemblyman John DiMario” and included “shared photographs and endorsements.” Complainant maintains the mailers “presented” Respondent and the Assemblyman “as running jointly or in alignment, using coordinated political branding and

messaging.” Complainant asserts Respondent violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(f), because Respondent’s inclusion of the Assemblyman in her campaign materials “represents an overt association with a partisan political figure in direct contrast to the ethical requirement for independent judgment.”

**B. *Written Statement and Allegation of Frivolous Filing***

In her Written Statement, which includes an allegation of frivolous filing, Respondent maintains that the political mailer “encouraged” voters to vote for Respondent, two other Board candidates and two Republican candidates for the General Assembly and it was paid for by the Assemblyman’s campaign. Respondent argues the mailer did not identify her as a Board member but only identified her as a candidate for the Board. Additionally, Respondent asserts the mailer did not identify the “assembly candidates party affiliation.” Further, Respondent claims she did not author the mailer, did not design the mailer, nor did she distribute the mailer. Therefore, Respondent argues the Complaint “fails to establish any of the elements required under *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(f)” and further argues she did not “surrender independent judgment to partisan interests, nor did she use the district resources for personal gain or for the gain of others.”

Respondent alleges the Complaint is frivolous because Complainant “refers to [] Respondent’s proper conduct and erroneously allege[s] that violations occurred simply because Respondent was endorsed by Assemblymen candidates.”

**C. *Response to the Allegation of Frivolous Filing***

Complainant reaffirms his assertions and argues the “Complaint is grounded in undisputed facts, supported by documentary evidence, and raises a legitimate ethical question within the jurisdiction of the [Commission]. Complainant maintains that “[d]isagreement with the Complaint’s conclusions does not make is frivolous.”

**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.”

***Alleged Violations of the Act***

Complainant submits that Respondent violated *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(f), and this provision of the Code provides:

f. I will refuse to surrender my independent judgment to special interest or partisan political groups or to use the schools for personal gain or for the gain of friends.

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

6. Factual evidence of a violation of *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(f) shall include evidence that Respondent took action on behalf of, or at the request of, a special interest group or persons organized and voluntarily united in opinion and who adhere to a particular political party or cause; or evidence that Respondent used the schools in order to acquire some benefit for herself, a member of her immediate family or a friend.

After review, 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 *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-24.1(f) was violated. Being endorsed by a politician or political candidate does not mean that Respondent has surrendered her independent judgment to special interest or partisan political groups. The Commission notes that a candidate who is running for a seat on the board of education might share similar beliefs or viewpoints as a political figure who endorses them but on its own, that does not demonstrate that the candidate took action, on behalf of, or at the request of, the special interest or political group.

The Commission reminds the public that while there is no statute specifically prohibiting candidates from being endorsed by a political party, the Commissioner of Education has traditionally cautioned against political party endorsements of school board members, as school elections should be nonpartisan. *I/M/O the Annual School Election in the Brick School District*, 93 N.J.A.R. 2d 360. Board members should also be guided by *Advisory Opinions* A10-18, and *Advisory Opinion* A03-07 with regard to endorsements.

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

#### **IV. Request for Sanctions**

At its meeting on March 24, 2026, the Commission considered Respondent's request that the Commission find the Complaint frivolous, and impose sanctions pursuant to *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-29(e). Despite Respondent's argument, the Commission cannot find evidence that might show that Complainant filed the Complaint in bad faith or solely for the purpose of harassment, delay, or malicious injury. The Commission also does not have information to suggest that Complainant knew or should have known that the Complaint was without any reasonable basis in law or equity, or that it could not be supported by a good faith argument for an extension, modification or reversal of existing law. *N.J.A.C.* 6A:28-1.2. Therefore, at its meeting on April 28, 2026, the Commission adopted a decision finding the Complaint not frivolous, and denying the request for sanctions.

## V. Decision

In accordance with *N.J.S.A.* 18A:12-29(b), and for the reasons detailed herein, the Commission hereby notifies Complainant and Respondent 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 Commission further advises the parties that, following its review, it voted to find that the Complaint is not frivolous, and to deny Respondent's request for sanctions.

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: April 28, 2026

***Resolution Adopting Decision  
in Connection with C106-25***

***Whereas***, at its meeting on March 24, 2026, the School Ethics Commission (Commission) considered the Complaint, the Written Statement and the allegation of frivolous filing, and the response to the allegation of frivolous filing submitted in connection with the above-referenced matter; and

***Whereas***, at its meeting on March 24, 2026, 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 March 24, 2026, the Commission discussed finding the Complaint not frivolous, and denying the request for sanctions; and

***Whereas***, at its meeting on April 28, 2026, the Commission reviewed and voted to approve the within decision as accurately memorializing its actions/findings from its meeting on March 24, 2026; 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 April 28, 2026.

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Brigid C. Martens, Director  
School Ethics Commission