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Leader of CMS board in limbo

In surprise, Gauvreau votes with Dems, leaving Griffin and Merchant in 4-4 tie to be chair.

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The school board is taking applications from candidates to fill the District 2 seat vacated by Vilma Leake, now a Mecklenburg County commissioner. Applications are due by 5 p.m. Jan. 5. The board will vote Jan. 13 on the new District 2 representative, who will serve until December 2009.

Candidates can request an application from the Board of Education office (701 E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Room 418). For details, call Judy Whittington at 980-343-5139.

Republicans gained a seat on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board Tuesday, but a surprising defection from their ranks left the board's leadership in limbo and raised questions about the balance of power.

Republican Larry Gauvreau, a relentless critic of Democratic priorities, joined his political foes to block Trent Merchant's ascension to the board's chairmanship.

Sources had said that starting last week, Merchant, the panel's only independent, had hammered out a deal with Republicans to support their candidate for the vacant District 3 seat. In return, they would help him unseat longtime Democratic Chairman Joe White.

The first part fell into place. Merchant joined Gauvreau and GOP members Kaye McGarry and Ken Gjertsen to appoint James Ross, a 73-year-old retired management consultant, to the District 3 post. Ross is a registered Republican.

The Democrats wanted Michael Evans, a Winthrop University professor, CMS parent and registered Democrat.

When it came time to pick a new chair, Gauvreau surprised many by joining Democrats White, Tom Tate and Molly Griffin in backing Griffin. That left Griffin and Merchant each with four votes.

Gauvreau then moved to delay the decision for a month. The board agreed, putting the gavel back in White's hands, at least for now. Later, the board approved McGarry as vice chair.

Tuesday's vote left unclear the balance of power on a board that controls a \$1-billion-plus budget and oversees 134,000 students and 19,000 employees. With a tough budget year anticipated, hard decisions could be needed on spending – a subject that often finds Republicans and Democrats in disagreement.

Asked after the meeting why he voted with the Democrats, Gauvreau replied: "I didn't vote for the Democrats. I voted for a leader." He added that he respects Griffin's commitment to her positions.

"Although we politically disagree on many things, she's a leader. She doesn't change and flip-flop."

Asked whom he'll support during next month's vote for chair, he said he wasn't sure yet, but that he could conceivably vote for Griffin again.

Merchant, who intends to continue his quest for the chairman's gavel, said the vote turned out as he'd expected. The dynamics among board members isn't as simple as party affiliation, he said, noting that voting alignments routinely shift depending on the subject.

"It's an oversimplification to count D's and R's," he said. He added that he was pleased that candidates he backed won the vice chair and the District 3 seat.

Ross, an African American, will represent the heavily Democratic district whose seat was vacated by George Dunlap, one of two African American Democrats who left the school board for seats on the county commission. Vilma Leake, who represented District 2, vacated her seat earlier this month.

The appointment of a Republican didn't sit well with some African American community leaders. The Rev. Ricky Woods congratulated Ross, but added that the board should respect District 3 voters' political preferences.

"What's important is that you don't look for a candidate simply to support your political agenda," Woods said after the meeting.

Merchant, in an interview last week, expressed hope that the new chair would eschew partisanship and give Republicans, long the board's minority bloc, a fairer hearing in policy debates.

"I think some of the rancor we have comes from a sense of frustration by some that their ideas are not being given full consideration," he said.


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mytemp001 wrote on 12/10/2008 08:37:08 AM:

What's important is that you don't look for a candidate simply to support your political agenda, Woods said after the meeting." It goes both ways. There are Democrats protesting that Leake is a Democrat so the seat should be filled with a Democrat. Hog wash. There were Republicans trying to stack the board with Republicans and appoint a Republican chairman This is a non-partisan board, so party affiliation should never have been a factor for ANYONE. What matters is who has the *experience* and leadership to make sure our children get the best education possible. And the only question that has yet to be answered is -did they

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