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CMS board ends deadlock

Picks Griffin as new chair; Mitchell-Walker for vacant seat

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The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board chose longtime member Molly Griffin as its new chair tonight, a few minutes after ending a short deadlock and tapping Kimberly Mitchell-Walker to fill its District 2 seat.

Griffin, who will leave the board at the end of the year, takes the gavel from Joe White. She received six votes to Republican Kaye McGarry's three. McGarry will serve as the board's vice chair.

Earlier, the board voted 5-3 to put Mitchell-Walker in the District 2 seat vacated by Vilma Leake. Leake left the board after being elected to the Mecklenburg County commission. After being sworn in, Mitchell-Walker added her support to Griffin.

The board initially split 4-4 between Mitchell-Walker and Deborah Ware, an activist intent of reducing the district's drop-out rate and a close political ally of McGarry.

Mitchell-Walker, a Democrat and the sister of Charlotte City Councilman James Mitchell, received the support of the board's three Democrats -- Chairman Joe White, Molly Griffin and Tom Tate -- along with newly appointed Republican member James Ross.

Ware, whose children and grandchildren have attended CMS schools, got the backing of McGarry, Republicans Larry Gauvreau and Ken Gjertsen, and Independent Trent Merchant.

Merchant cast his first vote for community activist Richard McElrath. On the second round he threw his support behind Ware. After a short recess called by White, Merchant cast the deciding vote for Mitchell-Walker.

The new board will plunge quickly into crafting a recession-squeezed budget for 2009-10. Among the challenges: How to divvy up the money so disadvantaged students get the help they need, without shortchanging successful schools or driving affluent families out of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

For Republicans, their new position of equality/dominance will mean translating general talk about cutting waste and administrative expenses into specifics. The board's three/four Democrats can no longer rely on agreeing among themselves; for any of their plans to pass, they'll have to get support from Merchant and or Republican colleagues.

But alliances and philosophies are far from clear, and few expect a clean break along party lines.



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