

Political Intighting Paralyzes State Board Of Education

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By Sigrid Bathen
Bee Staff Writer

There was a moment last week when the increasingly troubled business of running public education in California ground quite literally to a halt.

The state Board of Education was scheduled to act on controversial new regulations governing the state's \$54 million migrant education program. The regulations already were one month overdue.

SIX VOTES were needed to pass the regulations. Seven of the board's nine members were present, and one — Lorenza Calvillo Schmidt, the board's only Hispanic member — was openly opposed.

As the vote was about to be taken, member Mary McLuhan gathered up the massive board agenda and prepared to leave. It was 3:15 p.m. on the first day of the board's monthly two-day meeting in Sacramento. The agenda was running two hours late.

If McLuhan left, the regulations would not pass. Apparently under the impression that she would support the regulations — already discussed in exhaustive previous board meetings — five members asked her to stay.

BOARD MEMBER Bill Honig, pressed for time himself, pressed for the question.

McLuhan stood, her arms loaded with board paper work, hesitantly leaning toward the door, looking nervously from the five board members on one side of the room, to Schmidt on the other.

She abstained.

THE VOTE was 5-1. Lorenza Schmidt had won another round in the increasingly bitter political rivalries that characterize state board meetings.

Honig — the Marin County school superintendent who will announce Monday that he is running against Wilson Riles for state schools superintendent next year — left directly after McLuhan.

The next day, McLuhan told board members she was surprised that her vote was crucial. Again, the board did not have a quorum to conduct its regular business.

"Mary had said she would vote for the regulations," said one state education official close to the controversy. "She was simply intimidated by Lorenza."

LORENZA SCHMIDT is a formidable advocate. Short in stature and sharp of tongue, she heads a significant board minority which has successfully blocked — or effectively delayed — important

board policies favored by the majority.

Director of a student dormitory at the University of California in Irvine and a longtime Chicana activist, she is a frank advocate of the have-nots in California education — poor children, Spanish-speaking children, the children of migrant farm workers. Articulate and outspoken, she does not hesitate to point an accusatory finger at fellow board members she believes are less than zealous in the defense of her constituency.

Politically, she is able to muster important support. On a board heavily lad-

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en with lame-duck appointments — and one unfilled seat — she successfully lobbied Gov. Brown to renew her appointment, which expired last year.

SCHMIDT'S REAPPOINTMENT was seen by other board members and state education officials as an unkind slap at board President Ann Leavenworth, a longtime Brown supporter and the particular target of Schmidt's caustic attacks on the board. Leavenworth's appointment has not been renewed.

In an April 30 letter to Gov. Brown, Schmidt urged him to appoint new members to the lame-duck seats currently held by board members in the six-member majority on the board. That would include Leavenworth, Joy Drinker and Lorene Wax. McLuhan, whose appointment expired in January, generally votes with Schmidt and Allan Seid on issues which split the board.

"If the six votes are left in bloc," Schmidt wrote the governor, "it remains difficult to design progressive, effective and humanistic education."

Schmidt was in Colorado and unavailable for comment. McLuhan could not be reached. The governor's office had no comment on Brown's failure to make timely appointments to the state board.

WHILE SCHMIDT decries the alleged insensitivity of Leavenworth and other board members to the educational needs of ethnic minorities in California, state Education Department officials — and some board members — accuse Schmidt of using her post for personal political gain, of divisiveness, of intemperate name-calling.

The bulk of Schmidt's attacks have been on board president Leavenworth, who was characterized in one Schmidt memorandum as racist.

"The assault on minorities continues unabated under the leadership of Ann Leavenworth," Schmidt wrote in a Nov.

25, 1980, memo to another board member, on state board letterhead. "It will be a rough tenure under Ms. Leavenworth; it will be a continuation of the exclusion and power abuse of Mr. Kirst (former board president Michael Kirst)."

IN THE MEMO, Schmidt complained that Leavenworth would probably not appoint any of the ethnic minority board members to chair committees. Leavenworth made no changes in the existing committee structure, and Schmidt remained as head the Specially Funded Programs Committee. Lewis Bohler, Jr., who is black, is vice-president of the board.

The board's committee structure has become largely moot, however, since the board began meeting in April only in full session. Officials close to the board say board members no longer "trust" each other sufficiently to meet in separate committees. "They want it all out in the full board," one official said.

Many state education officials are offended by Schmidt's attacks on Leavenworth's ethnic sensitivities. "Ann Leavenworth has a solid background in liberal causes," said one official who asked anonymity. "For her to be cast in the role of the oppressor is absurd."

"IT IS IRONIC," Leavenworth said in a telephone interview with The Bee Friday. "My record for 20 years in Fresno politics was as a reformer. The beginnings of voluntary integration occurred in Fresno when I was president of the school board there. I was one of the early advocates of migrant education."

"I have always been very concerned that we meet the needs of all children."

Leavenworth, who holds a Ph.D. in American history from the University of Colorado, taught government, constitutional law and criminal justice at Fresno State University and the University of Maryland.

SHE SERVED on the Fresno school board for eight years, and has been an active member of the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Women's International League for Peace and the League of Women Voters. She has also been active

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in Democratic Party politics and served on the Democratic Central Committee.

She and her husband Russell, a retired history professor, reside in Santa Cruz.

Despite the severity of the attacks on her, Leavenworth refuses to trade barbs with Schmidt. "Actually most of the board members are very close in their political philosophies," she said quietly. "Unfortunately, to disagree agreeably is difficult for some."

"I've had a lot of experience on boards. It is very political. There is no reason to believe education is sitting on some holy mountain and is not political. But it is very important that when the majority takes action, those who disagree go along with it. Otherwise, there is great disruption.

"**AT THE PRESENT** time public education is in serious trouble. It needs the best efforts of all of us, and personality conflicts are inappropriate."

And, she said the time pressures on board members, most of whom have other full-time responsibilities, are enormous. "Legislation is passed, and regulations have to be passed by the board," she said. "I spend a great deal of time chairing public hearings on regulations, because nobody else on the board has time."

Divisions on the board have reached such flash points in recent meetings that quorums are frequently lacking to take action on important educational issues. In last week's meeting, the board didn't have a quorum to pass the minutes of the previous month's meeting, much less act on important — and controversial — issues dividing it.

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT staff who provide backup to the board are beginning to break with tradition and openly complain about the board's failure to act on important educational issues which have occupied enormous amounts of staff time.

"Staff is getting very much distressed," said one official who asked for anonymity. "They feel their time is being wasted while board members engage in politics. They have been asked to undertake inhuman tasks by the board, and then after all their work, there is this incredibly cavalier attitude on the board.

"They burn up staff. They waste staff time. They keep staff members sitting there in board meetings for hours, and then don't take action."

OFFICIALS AND some board members are particularly critical of Schmidt's tactics. Bohler last month accused Schmidt of "name-calling" in her attack on board approval of regulations for bilingual education.

At that meeting, Schmidt decried "the negative

way this board is articulating this issue for the public," and said the board's action was "an embarrassment" and an "abusive act."

Whereupon the normally mild-mannered Bohler, an Episcopal priest from Los Angeles, accused Schmidt of making "a very dangerous charge which is almost completely without factual foundation."

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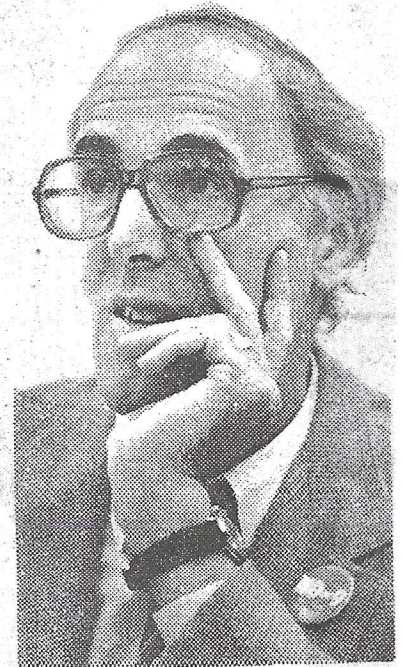
MARY McLUHAN
... votes with Schmidt



LORENZA SCHMIDT
... 'a formidable advocate'



ANN LEAVENWORTH
... board's liberal president



LOUIS HONIG Jr.
... to seek Riles' job