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Education Squabble

Split Leaves Board Chairless For Time

By Sigrid Bathen
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State Board of Education President Ann Leavenworth was narrowly elected to a second term Tuesday, but only after state schools chief Wilson Riles reminded the sharply divided board that it could not conduct business without officers.

Riles said he could not recall any time in his two decades with the state Department of Education when the state board, which sets policy for public education throughout California, had reached a stalemate in so routine a matter as the election of officers.

The 10-member board was evenly divided 5-5 on the first ballot, with half the members voting for Leavenworth and half for Uvaldo Palomares, a San Diego educator and consultant recently appointed to the board by Gov. Brown.

The split was consistent with the philosophical divisions that repeatedly have split the board and effectively prevented action on important — and controversial — issues before it. As the major policy-setting body for elementary and secondary education, the board must provide guidance to financially strapped local districts, which are increasingly dependent on state money and direction.

In recent months, the board has been unable to agree on complex regulations affecting multimillion-dollar programs for bilingual and migrant education.

With the 5-5 vote taken shortly after the board convened Tuesday morning, Riles reminded members that "it requires six votes to do business on the state board of education, and we can't do business." He then called a recess, and members hurriedly caucused in small groups.

When the meeting reconvened, the vote was 6-4 for Leavenworth, with board member Mary McLuhan — the board's only lame-duck appointee, her term having expired last January — providing the swing vote.

McLuhan has been criticized frequently by other board members for indecision on important matters. They point to the migrant education regulations, which failed to pass last spring when McLuhan abstained at a critical point. Several sources close

to the board said McLuhan indicated Monday night she intended to vote for Leavenworth, then changed her vote Tuesday.

"I intended to vote for Ann," McLuhan said in an interview Tuesday. "I made up my mind a week ago. She has worked very hard and I have the greatest respect for her.

"But I knew it was going to be a bloc vote, and I wanted it to be a bloc vote so I could negotiate something for Uvaldo."

Asked what she intended to negotiate by creating the 5-5 split, McLuhan indicated interest in Palomares as vice-president. Later, when nominated for the vice-presidency after Leavenworth was elected, Palomares declined. Lewis Bohler, an Episcopal priest from Los Angeles, was unanimously elected vice-president for a second term.

McLuhan admitted she is the "swing vote" in many board disputes and insisted, "I don't take sides."

Also voting for Palomares on the first ballot were Lorenza Schmidt, Alan Seid, Robert Arroyo and Palomares. The four have criticized the actions of other board members on bilingual and migrant education, and Schmidt has been openly hostile toward Leavenworth — at one point last spring calling on Gov. Brown to remove the college government professor and former Fresno school board president from the state board.

Brown reappointed Leavenworth to the board along with Schmidt and new members Palomares, Arroyo and Josie Bain. All face confirmation hearings in the state Senate today.

Voting for Leavenworth on the first and second ballots were William Gilbert, Bill Honig, Bohler, Bain and Leavenworth.

Although board members promised greater efforts to cooperate and reach consensus this year, their vote on several issues Tuesday indicated no real end to the conflict. In fact, because of disputes over bilingual regulations adopted last April, the board postponed adoption of the minutes of the April meeting until next month and called the regulations back for further review in November.

The board will continue its September meeting today and Thursday in the state education building on Capitol Mall.

