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Dist. 15 board to victors

Two slates each hope they'll become the majority

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A shift on the Palatine Township Elementary District 15 board in Tuesday's election could lead to a dramatic change in how labor negotiations are handled, the search for a superintendent, the budget process and how the district tries to retain young administrators, both sides say.

Both sets of candidates — and their supporters currently on the board — acknowledge that much is at stake Tuesday.

Three seats are open.

Linda Silverman, Paula Mikula and Scott Boucher will not be running for re-election, creating the openings.

The board is polarized. Four members who have been on the board a few years — Silverman, Mikula, Boucher and board President Nancy Carlson — are often at odds with three new members — Tim Millar, Wendy Rowden and Kelly Keenan — elected in 2005 in a wave of voter dissatisfaction over previous financial decisions.

Millar, one of the new members, said if his side wins a majority the board would put an end to no-bid contracts. He is supporting Lisa Neal, Sue Quinn and Mary Vanek.

He added that upcoming negotiations with employees would be handled with greater concern for taxpayers. He said he believes the recent teacher contract was too generous.

Millar said that with a majority, the board would work more efficiently, hire more staff to reduce class sizes, and restore some of the programs that were eliminated in budget cuts, like field trips.

He cited current board members who refuse to work together, preventing the board from establishing financial goals and to better determine which educational objectives to pursue.

"It really goes back to how a board should operate," Millar said.

Meanwhile, Gerald Chapman, running on a slate with Richard Bokar and Dr. James Ekeberg, said if elected they'll work to unify the board and eliminate dysfunction.

"We have a solid group of people with the same aspirations," he said. "We'll run the district to focus on the kids."

Chapman added that working to balance next year's budget is a priority. He also wants to reduce class sizes by adding more teachers.

The current board is also divided along the lines of who supported the 2006 teachers contract. The board voted 4-3 for the agreement, narrowly averting a strike. Voting for the contract were Silverman, Mikula, Boucher and Carlson.

The Bokor, Chapman and Ekeberg slate has the support of board President Nancy Carlson, who voted to ratify the contract. Carlson's first order of business with a new board is to improve effective educational programs, including hiring reading specialists.

"A kid can't do well in math unless he knows how to read," she said. "Everything in the modern world is based upon reading."

Carlson also wants to see the board work to retain staff. She pointed to the exodus of several administrators from District 15, notably Assistant Superintendent for Business and Auxiliary Services Kevin Nohelty, who is taking another job at the end of the school year.

Quinn, meanwhile, proposes posting board meeting agendas on the district Web site and introducing a financial report card to give voters a better idea of how the district is doing with its money.

"We must significantly improve communications and start to improve financial accountability," she said.

Labor negotiations with teachers are one area that would be radically changed depending on who is elected, Quinn said. She said she wants to start on the next contract now.

"I would like to see discussion pretty much start immediately, depending on whatever is practical with the union," she said.

Quinn suggested that if elected, the Chapman slate would be more generous with the teachers.

Chapman, however, said even if his whole slate is elected, that doesn't mean they'll be a rubber stamp.

"I'm sure they are going to be issues we on the board don't agree 100 percent on," he said.

Carlson added that the three-year teachers' contract was agreed to in October and is not a pressing priority. She'd rather focus on the search for a new superintendent.

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