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With union support, establishment candidates turn back critics of gradual school reopenings

By: Eric Peterson & John Lampinen

Voters throughout the Northwest suburbs sent educators a message Tuesday -- for the most part endorsing the gradual reopening approach most districts have taken in response to the pandemic.

In school district after school district, candidates who put a priority on listening to the health experts were elected, apparently often with the help of teachers unions.

This was the case in Glenbard High School District 87, Stevenson High School District 125, Palatine-Schaumburg Townships District 211 and Northwest Suburban High School District 214.

But there were exceptions: In Arlington Heights Elementary District 25 and Barrington Unit District 220, voters split their choices between measured reopening candidates and those who were strongly critical of the remote learning environment.

Voter concerns about the impact of the pandemic on local students did not turn out many incumbents.

Out of 34 incumbents in contested races on school board ballots throughout the Northwest suburbs, only three appeared to have been defeated, according to unofficial tallies -- Janice Krinsky in Elk Grove Township Elementary District 59, Michael Shackleton in Barrington Unit District 220, and Aurora Austriaco in Maine Township High School District 207.

But the boards will be losing experience nonetheless. Before Election Day dawned, several school board members had called it quits, with 17 incumbents declining in contested races to seek another term -- more than a third of the Northwest suburban seats that were up for election.

The exhaustive debate over the proper school response to the pandemic clearly played a role.

The topic has been a matter of angry public debate in school board meetings at several districts, almost since the beginning of the school year.

Informal parental surveys at several school districts showed deep divisions between those who advocated a cautious approach centered around health department advisories and those who called for schools to reopen out of concern for impact remote teaching was having on student education, particularly in case where disadvantaged households did not have the same access to technology and at-home work space.

The depth of these divisions were clear not just in the intensity of the campaigns but by the sheer size of the fields running for contested school board seats in the Northwest suburbs -- an average

of almost two candidates for every seat. In District 220, 11 candidates were running for four seats; in Glenbrook High School District 225, 10 competed for four seats.

"There's just incredible frustration, grief," Tom Bertrand, executive director of the Illinois Association of School Boards told the Daily Herald last week. "Everybody is experiencing some kind of loss. ... I give credit to anyone who is willing to serve as a volunteer in this environment."

All sides conceded that restrictions imposed by the pandemic -- whether strict or loose -- have had a deleterious effect on students, although some educators were more optimistic than others that ground could be made up.

"It is going to take multiple years of effort to ensure that this generation does not miss out," **Tony Sanders, superintendent in Elgin Area Unit District U-46**, observed two weeks ago. "Kids are very resilient. Even if they have not met all the academic standards, they certainly are learning a lot of lessons in this time."

Meanwhile, the impact of teacher union involvement in several of the races was clear.

Unions openly backed candidates in Glenview Elementary District 34, Elk Grove Township Elementary District 59, Glenbard High School District 87, Palatine-Schaumburg Townships High School District 211, Northwest Suburban High School District 214, and Glenbrook High Schools District 225, among others.

Those union candidates were successful virtually everywhere. The lone exception was in District 220 where union-backed candidates Lauren Berkowitz Klauer and Thomas J. Mitoraj lost.

But union-backed candidates Ding and Ficke-Bradford won in District 220; Jim Baumstark, Diane Stefani and James Dolan won in District 34; Daisy Espino, Roberto Mancilla Jr., Robert Sagerer and Mardell Schumacher in District 59; Judith Weinstock, Robert "Bob" Friend, Mireya Vera and Kermit Eby appeared to have won in District 87; Anna Klimkowicz, Curtis Bradley and Tim McGowan won in District 211; Andrea Rauch, Mildred Palmer, Mark Hineman, Lenny Walker won in District 214; and Bruce Doughty, Peter Glowacki, Michelle Seguin and Matt O'Hara won in District 225.

Here is a look at the results from some of the more hotly contested races:

District 25

In a race of candidates deeply divided over schooling through the COVID-19 pandemic, voters in Arlington Heights Elementary District 25 seemed to favor diversity of opinion by electing four candidates with mixed views of the district's actions.

Unofficial results show incumbents Anisha Ismail Patel, Gina Faso and Rich Olejniczak headed to apparent victory. Joining them will be newcomer Greg Scapillato.

District 59

School board President Janice Krinsky appears to have been ousted by the political strength of widespread teacher opposition.

Krinsky, of Arlington Heights, had lost the backing of the faculty because of her previous support for departing Superintendent Art Fessler, the subject of controversy among teachers partly because of how he introduced a new curriculum.

Teachers instead backed the other four candidates in the race: longtime incumbent Mardell Schumacher of Elk Grove Village, incumbent Roberto Mancilla Jr. of Arlington Heights and challengers Daisy Espino of Mount Prospect and Joseph Sagerer of Elk Grove Village.

District 211

Three candidates supportive of Palatine-Schaumburg High School District 211's handling of the pandemic and finances claimed the three seats on the board of education.

Leading the pack with 146 of 148 precincts reporting were newcomer Curtis Bradley with 8,074 votes, the sole incumbent Anna Klimkowicz with 7,986 votes and Timothy McGowan with 7,430 votes -- all on a slate endorsed by the teachers union.

District 214

An incumbent-led slate that favored a careful reopening of schools in Northwest Suburban High School District 214 and was endorsed by the teachers union won the race for four seats on the board.

But it is the sole newcomer on that slate, Andrea Rauch, who led with 11,601 votes with 149 of 150 precincts reporting.

Just behind her are incumbents Mildred "Millie" Palmer with 11,359 votes, Mark Hineman with 10,534 and Leonard "Lenny" Walker with 10,019.

District 220

The results from Cook, Lake, Kane and McHenry counties show Erin Chan Ding, who had the Barrington teachers union backing, leading the 11-candidate field with 1,913 votes. She's followed by fellow newcomer Steve Wang with 1,885 votes. Running third is newcomer Katie Karam with 1,876 votes. Both Wang and Karam were endorsed by Action PAC and the Barrington Township Republicans.

Current board Vice President Sandra Ficke-Bradford, who is also backed by the teachers union, ran fourth with 1,667 votes, the returns showed.