

Religious Right spokesman on Texas school board unseated by challenger

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DALLAS—The Religious Right suffered a surprise setback in Texas when incumbent Don McLeroy—a creationist and critic of church-state separation—narrowly lost his re-election bid for the powerful State Board of Education to challenger Thomas Ratliff in the March 2 Republican primary.

The board's role in determining public school standards not only influences textbooks in Texas, but also has an impact across the nation. Texas is one of the top two buyers of textbooks in the United States, and many publishers develop their books with the Texas market in mind.

McLeroy, a dentist from Bryan, lost by fewer than 900 votes. Since no Democrat filed for the race, Ratliff will assume the seat next year. Ratliff, a legislative consultant and lobbyist from Mt. Pleasant, is the son of former Lt. Gov. Bill Ratliff.

McLeroy served as chair of the State Board of Education from July 2007 to May 2009, when Democrats in the Texas Senate blocked his confirmation as chair, accusing him of ignoring the concerns of classroom teachers and advancing a political agenda regarding curriculum standards.

On his campaign website, McLeroy wrote: "Our nation is falling under the sway of the ideas of the far-left; the founding principles of our nation are being neglected and forgotten. ... But here in Texas, the conservatives on the Texas State Board of Education have the far-left in retreat. In the past two years, while I was privileged to chair the board, we won battles in math

class, English class, science class and we are now winning in history class.”

McLeroy led efforts to insert language into curriculum standards mandating that teachers instruct students about the strengths and weaknesses of evolutionary theory, and he asserted his personal belief in young-Earth creationism.

More recently, as the board has debated social studies standards, he touted as curriculum review experts self-published author and lecturer David Barton and Presbyterian minister Peter Marshall, both of whom have spoken about “the myth of separation of church and state” and the importance of teaching about America’s Christian heritage.

On his campaign website, Ratliff criticized the practice of assembling curriculum consultants “from around the country” as being politically motivated.

“Some of the SBOE members search far and wide to find ‘experts’ that also support their political agendas. But we need to ask, ‘Are these the best people to help Texas’ public school children?’ I think we need to spend more time utilizing Texas’ higher education experts and less time trying to find that ‘expert’ out there that also fits a particular political profile,” he wrote.

In recent years, the seven social conservatives on the board consistently voted as a bloc. With a couple of key swing votes, they occasionally won victories on the 15-member board.

Even with McLeroy’s loss, the balance of power on the board remains close. Dallas Republican Geraldine “Tincy” Miller, who was not part of the social conservative voting bloc, lost to teacher George Clayton in a seat that also has no Democratic challenger. Miller held her seat since 1984.

Ken Mercer of San Antonio, a consistent vote with the social conservative

bloc, won his bid in spite of a challenge by Tim Tuggey, also of San Antonio. He will face Democrat Rebecca Bell-Metereau, an English professor at Texas State University, in the general election.