

Seven elected as state regents

Three incumbents; four new to board

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ALBANY BUREAU

ALBANY — The state Legislature elected seven people Tuesday to the Board of Regents, the state's education- policy panel that has faced scrutiny in recent years for the oft-criticized rollout of the Common Core standards.

Lawmakers selected four new board members and three incumbents, opting to replace regents in western New York and the North Country who had been seeking another term.

Regents are elected by a joint session of both the Senate and Assembly, but the process is dominated by Assembly Democrats, who control 104 of the Legislature's 213 total seats.

Among the new members elected

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Regents

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Tuesday were Judith Johnson, a former school superintendent in Mount Vernon and Peekskill in Westchester County, and Catherine Collins, a former Buffalo school board member and current SUNY Empire State professor.

Johnson, who also worked for the U.S. Department of Education from 1997 to 2000, said the Board of Regents is "the perfect place for me to be." She will represent the state's 9th Judicial District, which includes Westchester, Rockland and Putnam counties.

"I've been in Washington, I've been in the (school) buildings, I've been a guidance counselor," Johnson said in an interview with Gannett's Albany Bureau. "So I have to take all of that wisdom and experience and work with others to try to shape the best policy we can for this generation of kids, and I think we need to do a better job."

The 17-member Board of Regents has overseen the implementation of the Common Core, a set of more-stringent education standards being rolled out in more than 40 states nationwide.

For years, the election of regents had been conducted without much drama, with Democrats generally coalescing behind incumbents. That changed last year, when parent anger over the rocky rollout of the standards led to more scrutiny and attention paid to the election cycle, with lawmakers opting to replace an Albany-area regent.

Candidates for the board were subjected to a series of public interviews with lawmakers, including a round in their home regions and another in Albany.

On Tuesday, the Legislature opted for two challengers: Collins, who will represent a district that stretches from Buffalo east to Orleans and Genesee counties; and Beverly Ouderkirk, a former Watertown-area superintendent.

Johnson will fill the seat left by Harry Phillips, a longtime regent who announced his retirement last October. Judith Chin, a former New York City administrator, was elected to a vacant seat.

The three incumbents re-elected were Kathleen Cashin of Brooklyn, Roger Tilles of Long Island, and Lester Young, an atlarge regent

from Brooklyn.

The votes varied from candidate to candidate. Republicans voted against several of the Democrats' picks and cast their ballots for some unsuccessful challengers, including Gerald Benjamin, a longtime SUNY New Paltz professor who had been seeking an at-large seat. Senate Minority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, D-Yonkers, praised all of the newly elected regents, including Johnson, who lives in New Hempstead, Rockland County. "I believe frankly all of our candidates and all of our new regents are incredible," she said on the Assembly floor. "Johnson has had an impeccable record on every level of government with every population." Collins replaces Robert Bennett, the former regents chancellor who was first elected in 1995. Bennett had been seeking a fifth term before stepping aside Sunday.

"I believe that Dr. Collins will bring to the 8th Judicial District a wealth of energy, independence and an awesome opportunity to move forward an agenda that will benefit all children," said Assemblywoman Crystal People-Stokes, D-Buffalo.

Rochester has two spots on the board, neither of which was up for election this time. T. Andrew Brown represents the 7th Judicial District and Wade Norwood is an at-large representative.

This year's elections marked the first time since 1993 that the process had been led by someone other than now-former Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, D-Manhattan.

New Speaker Carl Heastie, D-Bronx, oversaw the election Tuesday.

Bennett, who was chancellor from 2002 to 2009, said Heastie "controls the election" and "made a decision." "I'm out, and I don't want to make any more of it at this time," Bennett told Gannett's WGRZ-TV in Buffalo. At a news conference Tuesday, Heastie said he's hopeful the regents will listen to lawmakers' concerns about the Common Core rollout and education policy.

"We would hope that the regents would take the opinions of the Legislature, since we represent communities and families," he said.

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Judith Johnson, center, elected Tuesday to a five-year term on the Board of Regents, speaks with Assemblywomen Shelley Mayer, left, and Ellen Jaffee, right, on the Assembly floor.

JON CAMPBELL/GANNETT

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