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More women on the BOE than ever before

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BY TERENCE T. MCDONALD
THE MONTCLAIR TIMES
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When Shelly Lombard, the new school board president, introduced fellow board member Robert Kautz during last week's Montclair Board of Education meeting, she referred to him as the board's "senior statesman."



STAFF PHOTO BY GEORGE WIRT

The 2010-2011 Montclair Board of Education, which had its first meeting on May 17. From left, Shirley Grill, Deborah Wilson, Angelica Allen-McMillan, President Shelly Lombard, Robert Kautz, Robin Kulwin, and Vice President Leslie Larson.

Lombard quickly revised her statement, calling him "the only statesman."

Kautz, in his third term on the BOE, is now the board's only male representative. With Mayor Jerry Fried's recent appointment of three new female members to replace two men and one woman, the Montclair BOE is now more female-dominated than ever before.

In 1984, when Schools Superintendent Frank Alvarez's secretary began keeping track, there were three women on the seven-member BOE. For the next 25 terms, the number of female board members

ranged from three, for 10 terms; to four, for 12 terms; and five, for three terms.

For the Montclair board's 2010-11 term, there are six female representatives, a higher female/male ratio than any other Essex County school board.

That doesn't surprise Lombard, who noted that the presidents of Montclair's PTAs are all female, and most school volunteers are, too.

Women "are intimately involved in the schools to begin with, so it's natural for them to say, 'Oh, let me take the next step and apply for board membership,'" she said.

The percentage of women serving on Essex County's 20 school boards ranges from

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zero on the five-member Verona BOE to 80 percent on the similarly sized Caldwell/West Caldwell BOE.

Twelve of the county's school boards have a female presence below 50 percent; five boards have a female presence more than 60 percent.

Statewide, the number of women serving on school boards is less clear, but of the roughly 2,600 school board members on the New Jersey School Boards Association mailing list, about 46 percent are female, said Michael Yapple, NJSBA spokesman.

Debbie Walsh, director of Rutgers University's Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), isn't surprised by female-dominated boards of education. While such bodies can be the starting point for a female politician's career, their members are often seen as glorified caregivers, not important officials, said Walsh.

"School boards are a place people think of women being. It's playing to a sort of expectation," she maintained.

CAWP tracks the number of females in high elected office, but not at the school board level.

Lombard thinks Montclair's unique BOE – its members are appointed by the mayor, not elected by voters – may make it more attractive to women seeking to contribute.

"I think the whole elected thing and putting yourself out there – I think that tends to be more of a male tendency," she said. "How many female governors do we have? How many female senators do we have?"

Leslie Larson, Montclair's new BOE vice president, told The Times she thinks the number of the board's female representatives is irrelevant, and she wondered aloud if The Times would have called her if Fried had appointed three men instead of three women.

"I, frankly, think it should be the best people for the job," Larson said.

"It would be really sad if we have to replace a man for a man, or a woman for a woman ... how limiting would that be?" Larson asked.

When Fried spoke to The Times last month about his BOE picks, he said there was no "goal" to have a board mostly comprising females. In 2011 – when, incidentally, Kautz's third term expires – things may change, said the mayor.

"Next year it will be important to have male representation on the board," Fried observed.

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