

NEXT PAC VOTE SET FOR MAY 8

# School advocate groups clash over election

By Linda Conner Lambeck

BRIDGEPORT — The city school district's deeply divided parent organization will hold a second election for officers next month, after the first election was deemed so tainted the results were thrown out.

The top vote-getter for president in that election, Ondrea Moore, has since been kicked off the executive board of the District Parent Advisory Council.

Richard Pezzella, parliamentarian for the district PAC, said Moore was removed from office for failing to fulfill her duties as president and for interfering with the election, charges that Moore denies.

Moore's involvement with Excel, a local advocacy group that has "parent empowerment" as part of its mission, also troubled PAC officials.

"The concern was, 'Is she dealing with them more than dealing with us?'" Pezzella said.

Moore, who has a child at Bryant School, said her volunteer work with Excel should have nothing to do with her role on PAC.

"They think Excel is involved in hidden agendas. I don't see any hidden agenda. My concern as a parent is to make a better school system for our children," Moore said.

Excel's role in the district PAC election has also come under fire.

An email sent out before the election by Jorge Cabrera, a community organizer for Excel, called on a group of parents to come out in support of "change agents" who were running for office.

At the election, Cabrera went from table to table in the Central High School cafeteria to talk to parents. He also consulted privately with polling officials.

Cabrera said Excel was there to support parents who asked for help in running for office and to make sure election rules were applied equally.

Maria Zambrano, director of Excel, called Cabrera's role at the election overblown. Some parents, she said, do not feel welcome by the PAC.

"We talk about the need for more parent involvement. What is the problem with a community organization working to that end?" Zambrano said.

The next PAC election will take place May 8 from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. at the Parent Center, 900 Boston Ave. Any district parent is eligible to vote. There will also be cones outside the center to keep campaigning at an arm's length. Ballots will be put in a locked box with a security guard.

In Bridgeport, the district PAC is a 41-year-old organization



Moore



Kaufman

that's fueled with \$179,969 in federal Title 1 funds this year. There are district elections every other year and election turnout is traditionally low.

Sometimes, positions go unfilled. In a district of 20,000 students, the 150 parents who came out for the March 20 election represented a higher turnout than normal, of-

ficials said.

The election was deemed chaotic, according to many in attendance. Pezzella, meanwhile, called it an embarrassment.

Rob Traber, a city teacher and vice president of the Bridgeport Education Association, sat in the back of the room. He said the scene was reminiscent of a political convention at Democratic Town Committee Chairman Mario Testa's restaurant.

Janet Gomes, who has two daughters at Thomas Hooker School, likened the gathering to The Jerry Springer Show. She said there were debates about rules, shouting and fistfuls of ballots brought up at once, some with

names crossed out and Moore's name put down instead.

Moore beat Mark Kaufman, this year's vice president, by four votes, according to Pezzella.

Some Excel-backed parents were subsequently ruled ineligible for the 10 executive board positions because they had not been part of PAC for the two years required by the organization's bylaws. There was also disagreement over whether charter school parents could run for office, observers said.

Charter schools receive federal Title 1 funding and are expected to have PACs. But charter schools also have independent governing boards and are treated as separate school districts by the state.

As such, charter schools cannot participate in district PAC elections, said Tammy Boyle, corresponding secretary of the District PAC and a Columbus School parent.

Jessica Martinez, a parent who has a son at Luis Munoz Marin School, said she can't understand how 150 parent votes can be thrown out.

Martinez was deemed ineligible to run for one of the five, two-year terms as District Community Representative on the PAC. Martinez said she believes she is being excluded because she works part

time as a parent organizer for Excel.

"Excel BPT is the Parent Center to many parents," she said. "They threw Ondrea out illegally, illegally."

Kaufman, who has a daughter at Classical Studies and stepchildren at Harding and Dunbar, was elevated to acting president after Moore was asked to step down.

Late last week, Kaufman said he decided not to run for president in the new election. Instead, Kaufman said he plans to run for a district community representative position.

Moore, however, said she is definitely running again.

"I qualify," Moore said.

Pezzella disagreed.

"We dismissed her. She is not eligible to run for president," Pezzella said.

Applications for offices can be submitted to Pezzella or the district's Parent Center through Wednesday. So far, the only application for president that Pezzella deems eligible was submitted by Gomes, the parent leader at Hooker School.

"I am a concerned parent who wants to see the best for Bridgeport. So I say, 'Let's give it a try.' I think I can provide a fresh start," said Gomes, whose husband, John Gomes, unsuccessfully ran for mayor two years ago.