Following election, change may be on way for school boards in North Penn, Quakertown

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer

From North Penn to Quakertown Community and Central Bucks to New Hope-Solebury, Tuesday's primary results set the stage for change on several school boards.

And nothing could be more dramatic than the potential reversal in North Penn. If the unofficial primary numbers hold in the November election, the board's 8-1 Republican advantage could swing to a 6-3 Democratic edge.

"We're very optimistic," said Tina Stoll, a Democrat who led all 10 candidates with 5,462 votes, including 1,574 on the GOP ballot. "But we're not going to rest on our laurels. We've got to keep the momentum going."

The five Democrats, Christian D. Fusco, Jonathan Kassa, Jenna Ott, Stoll and Mark Warren, who ran on the slate North Penn Neighbors for Progress, received between 4,288 and 5,462 votes. The five Republicans, Josephine Charnock, Thomas Mancini, Patrick A. McGee Jr., Frank O'Donnell and Michelle L. Rupp, who teamed up as the group Quality Education Matters, ranged between 2,913 and 3,499 votes.

In the Quakertown Community district, the school board's GOP leadership is being challenged by Democrats. Kaylyn Mitchell, a Democrat who supported Sen. Bernie Sanders' presidential bid and who cross-filed for Tuesday's primary election, had more Republican votes Tuesday than school board President Paul Stepanoff, 500 to 401.

Her success on the GOP ballot knocked off incumbent Stephen Ripper in Region 1, comprised of Richlandtown, Haycock and Richland districts 1, 2 and 3. Ripper did not cross-file.

In November, Mitchell's name will be on both ballots. Her running mate, David Ochmanowicz, a national delegate in the Green Party, will be on the Democratic ballot while Stepanoff will be on the Republican ballot. The setup gives Mitchell a huge edge this fall.
"She's definitely going to be a member of the school board," Stepanoff said. "That's clear. There's no longer any reason to treat her as an opponent when she'll be a colleague. I do look forward to working with her. It's better when there's diversity among the team, and I would show her nothing but respect."

Stepanoff admitted his re-election could be in doubt. "I don't think I'm safe by any means," he said. "We're going to have to get our message out about what we've done."

He was surprised at the number of Republicans who voted for the Democratic, cross-filed candidate and said it could be because of a single issue or possibly a damaged Republican brand.

Besides Quakertown, Democrats teamed up to knock off an incumbent in New Hope-Solebury and put up strong showings in Centennial.

"The results of the general election last year bought out new candidates and really engaged people who may have not been previously involved in local government," said Jodi R. Schwartz, a political science professor at Montgomery County Community College.

Schwartz is one of those people. Both she and Tracy R. Suits won both the Democratic and Republican nominations Tuesday for an almost certain seat on the Central Bucks school board.

Schwartz knocked off three opponents, including incumbent director Meg Evans. In Region 5, made up of Chalfont and New Britain Township South 1 and 2 and West 1 and 2, Suits defeated Janelle Kerns in a bid to replace Paul Faulkner.

Combined with the unopposed victories of Nicole Young in Region 4 and incumbent John Gamble in Region 9, Central Bucks, which has six new board members since 2015, will likely have three new ones when the new board is sworn in this December.

"They really wanted to hear directly from their board member. They wanted more information and they wanted somebody to fight for them," Schwartz said she heard from constituents on the campaign trail. "They are worried about how the board spends money. I campaigned to make sure we watch our spending and plan for the long term, that we're spending money on necessities."
In New Hope-Solebury, incumbent Adrienne Deussing was defeated on both the GOP and Democratic ballots by a slate of four Democrats who will run unopposed in the fall.

Elizabeth K. Sheehan, who finished with the most votes, said the group "is pretty happy with the current direction of the school district."

She said she campaigned to involve more of the community, rather than only parents, in district decisions. "There may have been a missing sense of awareness of how vital that community stake is," she said. "We want to make sure we're engaging with as many community members as possible."