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City Hall Weighs Ouster of School Board Head, a Close Ally of Crew

By JACQUES STEINBERG

Six days before the Board of Education chooses its president for the next school year, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani yesterday was weighing whether to push the board to oust the current president, William C. Thompson Jr., from the post in favor of a mayoral ally, city and school officials said.

In a flurry of behind-the-scenes politicking that has gone on for several days, officials said the Mayor's aides were debating Mr. Thompson's fate among themselves and discussing the issue with several borough presidents, each of whom appoints one board member. By last night, officials said, no clear decision was at hand.

Because Mr. Thompson, who has led the board since 1996, has been an unfailing ally of Chancellor Rudy Crew, a move by the Mayor to replace him as president would also be a blow to Dr. Crew, with whom the Mayor has been feuding for several months. Mr. Thompson, the Brooklyn representative on the board, could not have been

elected president three years ago without the endorsement of the Mayor, but he has lost the Mayor's favor over the same issue as the Chancellor: they publicly opposed a City Hall proposal to finance private school tuition for some students with taxpayer dollars.

The Mayor is not likely to make a decision about replacing Mr. Thompson lightly, given the serious political ramifications. Like Dr. Crew, Mr. Thompson is one of the highest-ranking black officials in the city. And aides to Dr. Crew, who is the board's chief executive, said yesterday he would have to consider whether to serve out his contract, which expires next June, if Mr. Thompson is unseated.

A board official said, "Any overthrow of Bill Thompson would be a bloodless coup against Rudy Crew."

If the Mayor were believed to be behind such a power play, it would undercut an argument that he makes repeatedly: that he does not control the Board of Education, and is therefore not ultimately responsible for

the performance of the city's schoolchildren.

In addition to holding the highest-ranking office in the city public schools, the board president derives his power from the considerable sway he has over what measures come before the board for debate and vote.

Even if the Mayor decided to push for a change in the board presidency, though, he could not act alone. He selects only two of the seven board members — necessitating City Hall's talks with borough presidents. The representative from Staten Island, Jerry Cammarata, has been a consistent supporter of the Mayor since he



William C. Thompson Jr.

joined the board in 1995, as has the Staten Island borough president, Guy Molinari. But to remove Mr. Thompson, Mr. Giuliani would need a fourth vote.

Since the representatives from the Bronx and Manhattan are likely to side with Mr. Thompson, the vote of the Queens representative, Terri Thomson, would be the likely tie-breaker. And that vote remained up in the air last night.

The Queens borough president, Claire Shulman, said yesterday that the situation was fluid and that while she needed to talk to Ms. Thomson further, she would advise Mr. Thompson to hold off packing up his office.

"Billy is not out of the picture," said Ms. Shulman, who talked at least once yesterday with a close adviser to the Mayor, Peter Powers.

"The election is not until Tuesday," Ms. Shulman added. "I don't know how this will end up."

In a brief telephone interview from her

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Flushing home last night, Ms. Thomson said, "Billy and I are talking."

Mr. Thompson said he did not know what would happen but would continue to lobby his colleagues to secure another year as president.

"I think I have done a job that is worthy of being re-elected," said Mr. Thompson, whose tenure had, until the split over vouchers, been marked most notably by the relative tranquility between the board and city hall.

It was not at all clear yesterday who would succeed Mr. Thompson, should a majority agree to oust him.

Ms. Thomson would seem to be a leading candidate, but Ms. Shulman said that Ms. Thomson had consistently ruled out considering the job since joining the board last July. Ms. Shulman said that Ms. Thomson was concerned that her full-time position as director of city and state affairs for Citibank would keep her from devoting proper attention to the president's job, which has a \$20,000 annual stipend. (The other board mem-

bers receive \$15,000.)

City Hall officials said that Mr. Giuliani was considering throwing his support behind Ninfa Segarra, a deputy mayor who joined the board in 1990 and was reappointed by Mr. Giuliani in 1994.

During the Mayor's five and a half years in office, Ms. Segarra has been a valuable liaison between the Mayor and Hispanic citizens, though her power within the administration has waned.

Her selection would present the Mayor with a quandary. If a deputy mayor were elected president of the board, the Mayor could then be seen as directly responsible for the system's performance. Mr. Giuliani has always held the system at arm's length, saying as recently as this spring that it should be "blown up."

Ms. Segarra's election would also recall one of the most volatile periods in the board's history: the politically and socially divisive debates of the early 1990's over the distribution of condoms in schools and a curriculum that taught children about gay families. Ms. Segarra was a leader of the so-called Gang of Four that voted

not to renew the contract of Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez in 1993 over his support of those programs.

The president of the United Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, said that attempts to replace the president made her concerned about the board's independence, particularly since the fate of Mr. Thompson seemed likely to be decided at City Hall and Queens Borough Hall, and not at the board's headquarters in downtown Brooklyn.

"There has to be an independent voice for children," she said.

A wild card, who was said by one city official to be interested in the presidency, is Mr. Cammarata, the Staten Island representative. In his four years on the board, Mr. Cammarata has been a reliable ally of the Mayor but has otherwise maintained a low profile. He did not return a telephone call to his home last evening, or a page to his beeper.

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