

Thompson Endangered as Board President?

By Liz Willen and Jessica Kowal

STAFF WRITERS

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani is flirting with the idea of ousting Board of Education President William Thompson Jr., but some mayoral aides believe he may not follow through.

Replacing Thompson with a board member more closely linked to Giuliani, such as Deputy Mayor Ninfa Segarra, might bind the mayor to an often-teetering school system just as the campaign for U.S. Senate gets under way, mayoral aides and board sources say.

Also, it's unclear if Giuliani can find enough allies on the seven-member board to make a change when the board votes Tuesday. Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari, a Giuliani supporter, said yesterday that Thompson "has done a good job" as board president.

"If there was an effort to unseat Bill Thompson, I think it's safe and accurate to say that I would have

been called and advised," Molinari said.

Observers suggest three reasons Giuliani would want to ditch Thompson, who took the reins three years ago with the mayor's support: Thompson has opposed school vouchers, has supported Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew, and wants to be a Democratic candidate for city comptroller in 2001.

Giuliani said at a news conference that he has "given a lot of thought" to the next board president, but refused to reveal more. Aides said he may decide as early as today whether to support Thompson.

Crew, in Washington, D.C., yesterday, said that a change of leadership on the board would be disruptive.

Thompson, who would like another one-year term, said he's heard Giuliani might want to replace him with Segarra, who is a mayoral appointee, or Staten Island board representative Jerry Cammarata.

"Does it bother me? No. Is it disappointing? Yes," Thompson said. "I've done a very good job here."

The board is comprised of two mayoral appointees and a member selected by each borough president. Thompson, the Brooklyn representative, and the representatives from Manhattan and the Bronx typically have backed Crew's policies, while the mayor's appointees and the Staten Island member typically have sided with Giuliani. That often leaves the board member from Queens, Terri Thomson, as the swing vote.

Thomson, who did not return telephone calls yesterday, was said by one board source to be "in horror" of being placed in the middle of a decision. Thomson is said not to want the top post.

Bronx representative Sandra Lerner, who supports Thompson's re-election, said Terri Thomson told her privately two weeks ago that she would vote to reelect the board president. "I hold her to her word," Lerner said, "but I am very concerned because I know the power of the mayor and . . . she professes one thing and may capitulate under pressure."