

Contrast

Continued from Page 1A

As a Latina, an immigrant and a woman, Segura-Schwartz said she hadn't always felt confident she could be a representative on an elected body — even when people encouraged her to run.

She kept waiting for a candidate who offered a more diverse perspective to show up. They didn't.

"Something about that election. I felt readier," she said. "I tried to bring that message to the people that I was asking to vote for me. And I think that actually people were looking for that. People were looking for that contrast."

Over the past few decades, the school board has been more balanced than other local boards in regard to gender. But when Segura-Schwartz ran for office, the board had one woman — Debbie Erickson — who was not seeking re-election.

After the 2016 election, the school board had two women. After the 2018 election, the board had three women, as well as two people of color and a wider range of ages — more closely reflecting the constituents it represents.

A wider spectrum of representatives

The Times sent demographic surveys to members of St. Cloud-area cities, school boards, county boards and state bodies in April. It asked basic demographic questions such as gender, age and race, as well as other questions about political ideology, sexuality, household income, criminal background and religion.

The survey represents only a snapshot in time — insufficient in capturing people's collective experiences — but provides insight on who our leaders are and the things that influence their perceptions.

It also shows whether the makeup of elected bodies reflect the makeup of its constituents. Experts say that matters.

Of the board's seven members, one is a veteran and two have disabilities. All have some form of higher education: one has a doctorate, three have undergraduate degrees, two have graduate degrees and one has a trade school degree/certificate.

Three board members work full-



Mónica Segura-Schwartz was born in Colombia and moved to St. Cloud in 2001 to study English at SCSU.

PHOTOS BY DAVE SCHWARZ/ST. CLOUD TIMES

time, two work at one or more part-time jobs, one is self-employed and one is retired.

Five of the seven said they are religious; all listed Christian denominations or non-denominational.

Two of the school board's seven members — about 28% — are people of color. That's compared to about 18% of residents in the district, which includes St. Cloud, Waite Park, St. Joseph, St. Augusta, Clear Lake and Clearwater.

The school district's students are much more diverse: about 57% are students of color. About four in 10 students are black, according to the Minnesota Department of Education.

While Hispanic/Latino is an ethnicity — and not a race — it is included here in the racial breakdown because of the way the Minnesota Department of Education and American Community Survey list the data.

Some of the change is the result of an influx of refugees from Somalia and other East African countries over the past decade.

The demographic shift has caused tensions and emboldened some residents who are outspoken about stopping refugee resettlement.

But Central Minnesota's populace started changing from the predominantly white, German community decades ago.

Unique perspectives, experiences guide meaningful policy

When St. Cloud school board member Les Green, 77, came to St. Cloud in the mid-1960s, he remembers standing out as a person of color.

"There were only eight (black) students here when I came here and two other black families," Green said in an April interview.



Les Green was the first African American instructor at St. Cloud State University and also taught at College of St. Benedict.

Green came to St. Cloud as an inmate at the prison, where he was serving time for burglary and larceny. He had been kicked out of his Minneapolis school for behavioral problems related to drug use.

But after graduating high school inside the prison, he was one of the first inmates to try a work release-to-college program, ultimately graduating from St. Cloud State University in 1972.

"And that's where my life started," Green said.

When Green ran for the school board in 2005, he campaigned on his experience.

"My whole career was in education and so it was a natural for someone like me," he said.

Green was the first African American instructor at SCSU. He also taught at College of St. Benedict and was the first former inmate to be appointed to the state's parole board.

Green's experiences as a professional educator are vital to how he views his role on the school board: to listen to district employees and, in turn, provide professionals with the kind of policies to help them best educate children.

He also acknowledges his experiences — as a black man, as someone who lived in poverty as a child, was homeless in his early 20s, and as someone who has been convicted of a felony — help him evaluate issues from a unique perspective.

"I came through the Civil Rights Movement. I was 13 years old when Emmett Till, who was 14 years old, was murdered in Money, Mississippi. I understand what that did to me," Green said. "I understand — in 1957, being 14 years old — what Little Rock Central High School was like."

From his experiences, Green has learned education is the pathway "out of that swamp."

"I've been black all my life. I've been discriminated against all my life. And I actually wound up being successful anyway," he said. "The experience of winding up where I am today provides me with some ability to say to people, I know a pathway out of that swamp. Because I've traveled it."

What's important now, Green said, is to help educators understand how to teach young people of color "to step up to the plate and say ... 'I can be successful,' and for the kids in poverty to look at themselves and say, 'The pathway out of this poverty is education and attitude.'"

Segura-Schwartz, who works with the advocacy group Growth & Justice, also said her unique perspective helps shape meaningful policy. She was born in Colombia and moved to St. Cloud in 2001 to study English at SCSU.

"I do think (other board members) listen to me when I say things that are very specific of my perspective," Segura-Schwartz said, citing an example as a time she explained to members the important difference between interpreting and translation services.

Because her background and perspective are different from members born in Central Minnesota, Segura-Schwartz said it sometimes takes more effort to explain her thoughts and ideas.

"Part of the dynamics of the board is you can say whatever you want but that doesn't mean that people are going to hear it — and not because they don't want to hear you or because there is a lack of respect, but because their experiences are so different that they just don't understand what you're saying so they don't hear what you wanted them to hear."

In the last election, the board's composition changed again. Green got re-elected after taking two years off, another woman came on board and two more members in the 35-49 age group joined.

Since then, Segura-Schwartz said she has felt better heard.

"I think that people see the board as a more accessible place right now because it is more diverse than what it was," she said. "I think that might have already happened in the last election. So I think people can see themselves."

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