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West Bend charter school proposal at crossroads

Some say pastor's proposal is really a parochial education

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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West Bend — A publicly funded school proposed by a Baptist pastor has gained support among School Board members despite objections by the district's administrators over the school's use of "a standard parochial curriculum with evangelical leanings."

The School Board is scheduled to vote Monday on whether to enter into contract negotiations with First Baptist Church Pastor Bruce Dunford over his plans to open Crossroads Academy as a charter school next school year.

The school would teach a traditional curriculum that includes more classical readings and would have a more structured discipline system than other public schools, Dunford said. The school also would support the values of a majority of the West Bend community, he said, in response to concerns that he's heard about bullying and a lack of modesty and morality in the public schools.

He said the school would be operated separately and not on the grounds of his church, where West Bend School Board member Tim Stepanski is a deacon. Unlike most charter schools in which staff is employed by the chartering district, Crossroads would be a so-called non-instrumentality charter school - one that employs its own staff and has more independence from the School Board on its curriculum and how it runs its day-to-day operations.

"I just simply believe the taxpayers, the parents of the community, should have options available to them," Dunford said. "There should be a quality education that conforms to the value standards, convictions, whatever you want to call it, of a large part of our community."

But he denied that the school, which initially would serve students in kindergarten through seventh grade before expanding into the high school grades, would be a parochial school in disguise.

That has not allayed the concerns of Ted Neitzke, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction for the West Bend School District, who said that the curriculum submitted by the school contains many Christian and biblical texts without balance from readings of other religions. "It's a clear theme," he said.

Neitzke pointed to a number of the texts that were submitted as Crossroads' proposed curriculum, including the biblical story of Ruth for fifth-grade literature and "Joel: A Boy of Galilee" in seventh-

grade literature. The school also has proposed teaching about evangelist minister Billy Sunday in third-grade social studies alongside such figures as Laura Ingalls Wilder, Ben Franklin and George Washington Carver.

Crossroads' curriculum is based on one used by [Hillsdale Academy](#), a private K-12 school located on the Michigan campus of Hillsdale College, which is considered a bastion for conservative thinking in higher education.

Even though Crossroads plans to use the Hillsdale curriculum as a model, as have other public charter schools around the country, Dunford said that his school would revise it to make it appropriate for a public school.

"They're just jumping to conclusions and raising the wildest fears," he said. "We recognize the things that we can do and the things that we cannot do."

But a review by Patrick Elliott, a staff attorney with the Madison-based Freedom From Religion Foundation, identified 26 different curriculum materials proposed for use by Crossroads in grades 1 through 3 that come from Christian publishers and authors. In a letter sent Friday to West Bend board members that urged them to reject the proposed school, Elliott pointed out that an Idaho charter school modeled after Hillsdale Academy ran into legal problems over its use of the Bible in its curriculum.

ACLU inquires

The American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin also has requested information about Crossroads from the district, with legal director Laurence Dupuis writing that his group was concerned "about the potentially religious purpose of the proposed school."

The school's curriculum and church ties aren't all that worry district officials. The district's financial support also has created fears that payments made to the school could come at the expense of programs for students in the district's traditional schools.

Dunford said he has proposed taking only 85% of the revenue that the district will receive for each student that enrolls in the charter school. That amount will vary depending on whether the student already is enrolled in a district school, is currently in a private school or is home schooled or enrolls from outside of the district using the state's open enrollment public school choice program.

School Board member David Weigand pointed out that the school will be able to hire nonunionized staff with lower benefit packages that will cost taxpayers less to support.

He also said the school could attract new revenue to the school district by bringing in students who are not currently enrolled in district schools.

"I'm not saying we're in this to make money; we're in it to save the taxpayer money," Weigand said. "When you get new enrollments, you're increasing your base of support from the state and you are able to, if you choose, to use the count as part of your tax base for locally based revenue."

District administrators counter that even if they are able to retain some of the revenue, every student that switches from a district school to the charter school would be a drain on resources because they likely are unable to reduce costs by the same amount that they would have to pay to Crossroads.

School Board member Kris Beaver said parents already have the option to send their children to parochial schools and virtual schools or even home school them.

"When they say there's not choices out there, I disagree because there are choices out there," he said. "I just don't think that a noninstrumentality charter school is the right one for us at this time."

Even though he doesn't see the proposed school as a potential competitor to his West Bend Catholic school, Holy Angels School Principal Mike Sternig said if public money can go to Crossroads then Lutheran and Catholic schools should get equal support.

"I do have some serious concerns about the use of taxpayer money for funding what smells like, looks like, everything, a parochial school run by a pastor of a faith community," he said.

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