



West Bend School District divided by politics

Local, national upheaval affecting proud district

By [Kaellen Hessel](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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West Bend - Give a cursory glance to the West Bend School District and you won't see much to squabble about.

Schools are outperforming the state average, with the high schools consistently ranked in Newsweek as two of the best in the nation.

Costs are low, as the district spends the sixth lowest amount in the state. It's been recognized by the Center for American Progress as having a high return on investment.

The community appears to be supportive of its schools and the need for quality education.

Yet, disputes over school spending, social climate and educational policies have come with striking frequency in recent years:

- Last November, after intense community debate, the School Board narrowly voted against entering contract negotiations with a Baptist pastor who had proposed starting a publicly funded charter school that some feared would improperly involve religious teachings.
- At the beginning of the summer, the School Board voted to deny recognition to a chapter of the Gay Straight Alliance, a national youth organization, which led to a lawsuit being filed in federal court.
- At least seven formal complaints have been filed against three board members since November 2010, several of them filed by the president of the local teachers union.
- A referendum to rebuild Badger Middle School was passed in 2009 - but not without fervent debate in the community. Two other building plans were rejected in referendums just years before it.
- Two years ago, debate swirled around whether gay and allegedly sexually explicit material should be allowed to remain on the shelves of the young adult section of the West Bend city library.

To many in the thick of West Bend's issues, the acrimony is a reflection of the fissures evident in state and national politics taking hold at the local level, amped up during a difficult economy.

"The idea that we're greatly divided any more than anybody else in the state or nation is probably not accurate," School Board President Randy Marquardt said. "When a specific issue pops up, they react to it the way they feel, I guess. They take it as it comes."

Some of the debates stem from the financial woes people around the country are feeling. In the last four

years, the recession has caused property values to plummet nationwide, 13.9 million Americans are now unemployed and 401(k)s have tanked, leaving many in precarious financial situations.

Circumstances are no different in West Bend, which has the eighth-highest unemployment rate in Wisconsin at 10.7%. Many prominent companies in the area have closed, moved their factories or merged, leaving workers with fewer job prospects.

"Most of us are worried about how so much of what we've worked for is in danger of collapsing," says Tim Cullen, a resident who questions new programs added in West Bend's schools during the financial squeeze, such as Chinese classes.

Along with personal financial concerns comes greater citizen scrutiny of local governments in an effort to control the taxes they have to pay, said Jason Penterman, president of the West Bend Education Association, the union representing area teachers.

"They can't control what happens in Washington, but they can make change here," Penterman said.

The typical citizen is taking more of an active interest in the district's finances now with the current economic and political situation, said Jim Curler, principal at West Bend East High School. When people see a large organization like the government, they believe there's some kind of fluff that can be cut, he said.

"In West Bend, one of the big issues is the school district finances vs. programs and opportunities for kids," Curler said.

State Sen. Glenn Grothman (R-West Bend) said all governments should try to be more frugal, even if they're already low-spending. Officials should always be on the lookout for unnecessary spending, he said.

"It's fair to the taxpayer," Grothman said. "You're spending other people's money."

Joe Carlson was School Board president during some of the recent debates. The head of a manufacturing company, Carlson decided not to seek re-election in April.

Cuts for the sake of cuts aren't always the answer, he said.

"Good businesspeople focus on return on investment, not spending alone," Carlson said.

People should look at what could come out of the money that's being spent, not just how much is being spent, he said.

"If you look at West Bend, it's the best bargain in the state," Carlson said.

Tea party agenda?

Several School Board candidates ran in the past few years on a platform of holding taxes lower than would be allowed under the state's revenue limits. Three members of the current board - president Marquardt, Dave Weigand and Bart Williams - sprang from the grass-roots group Common Sense Citizens of Washington County, which is affiliated with Americans for Prosperity, an organization that helps finance tea party political activities. Other group members include West Bend's newly elected

mayor, Kraig Sadownikow, as well as aldermen and county supervisors elected since Common Sense formed in 2009, said Scott Schneiberg, president of the group.

The goal of Common Sense Citizens is to educate citizens on what's going on in the community by bringing in speakers of all political views, Schneiberg said. The group encourages people to be involved on a local level and will help members with campaigns if they decide to run for public office, he said.

Critics say the new wave of elected officials has gone beyond an agenda of fiscal conservatism by pushing a social agenda they see as wrong for public education.

In denying official school status for a Gay Straight Alliance chapter, the board shrugged aside warnings from the school district's attorneys that the decision was likely to prompt a costly lawsuit. The board also ignored an administrative recommendation that the club met the district's criteria to be sanctioned.

"They've (Common Sense Citizens) organized to take over and hijack local government," said Waring Fincke, a West Bend attorney who filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of the Gay Straight Alliance. The lawsuit contends that board members violated a federal law that forbids schools from denying a group access to facilities based on the group's beliefs and that the board violated students' First Amendment rights by discriminating against them based on their speech.

A month after the lawsuit was filed, the board voted to rescind its denial of the Gay Straight Alliance, though Weigand argued that the board should have stood its ground on behalf of parents who oppose the group on religious grounds.

Last November, in the debate over contracting with Baptist pastor Bruce Dunford, who proposed starting a publicly funded charter school, administrators warned that the school's curriculum was no different than what could be found at parochial schools and that the school could drain resources away from the district. Marquardt, Weigand and Tim Stepanski - who is a deacon at the pastor's Baptist church - voted in favor of the contract talks.

School Board members in West Bend have often been fiscally conservative - but not usually with a corresponding social agenda, Fincke says.

Over the past four years, moderates have disappeared from West Bend and now few people are working toward finding common ground, said Carlson, the former board president.

"If you're a moderate Republican in West Bend, you're a liberal," Carlson said.

lusive middle ground

Stepanski agreed middle ground has gotten hard to reach.

"I'm not saying I'm a compromiser, but if all we do is scream and shout we're not getting anywhere," he said.

Stepanski likens the board disputes to the tenor of Wisconsin's political climate - with extremists on each side dominating discussion.

"What that does is pit those of us on the board against each other," Stepanski said.

Stepanski, though, says he sees signs that divisions within the community are softening as the board focuses on communicating more positive messages, such as innovations, instead of focusing debates on funds.

Most of the community isn't divided, Superintendent Ted Neitzke said. Only those who pay attention to the district's business are split, he said.

Every quarter, the district sends out a community stakeholder's survey. Of the 400 to 500 people who responded recently, most of them aren't angry, Neitzke said.

Still, community members say the commotion isn't good for West Bend.

Flo Moran, a retired real estate agent, said selling homes in West Bend was easy when she started because the schools were fantastic. Now she knows agents who are pushing the other school districts in the area.

"Nobody wants to move their kids here," Moran said. "They see all this hubbub and craziness."

For the 2010-'11 school year, 108 more students left the district than entered it under open enrollment, according to state data.

Craig Farrell, executive director of the West Bend Area Chamber of Commerce, said he received three to four letters from people saying they chose not to move to West Bend because of the library books controversy.

"Anytime that there's something negative that comes out about a community, it has a long-term negative effect on the community and its growth," he said.

Several teachers and administrators, including the superintendent, have recently left the district.

The former superintendent, Patricia Greco, left West Bend - a district of about 6,900 students - this summer to become superintendent 20 miles south in Menomonee Falls, a district of about 4,500 students. Greco, whose name was Herdrich when she served in West Bend, could not be reached for comment.

Of all the things being debated in West Bend, the significance of having a good district isn't one of them.

"We all agree education is important and has value," said Cullen, a member of the Common Sense Citizens group. "It's the path of getting there which is divergent in the community."

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