

milwaukee journal sentinel

EDUCATION

Despite setbacks in elections, organizers behind school board recall efforts say it's 'just the beginning'

Rory Linnane Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Published 11:33 a.m. CT Dec. 2, 2021 | Updated 12:35 p.m. CT Dec. 2, 2021

By one metric, an explosive two years of recall attempts against school board members in multiple Wisconsin districts have failed: None of the 36 targeted members were unseated by special elections.

But recall organizers suggest that metric does not concern them. They're thinking bigger.

Already, many school board members have resigned after being threatened with recalls. Others are feeling burned out by the relentless vitriol. And the coalitions that sprung up to organize the recalls are not letting up; they're adapting.

Recall organizers initially focused largely on opposing virtual learning and mask requirements. While they're not abandoning conflicts over COVID safety measures, some recall organizers are also harnessing fresher energy in their communities over the subjects of equity and inclusion.

Their work is quickly spilling over from school board politics to the statehouse and beyond, with the recall elections having served as an opportunity to organize and energize like-minded parents and residents.

"Is this losing steam? Is this going to stop? No, it's only going to gain momentum as we move forward," said Amanda Nedweski, a recall organizer in Kenosha.

If Nedweski and others are correct, their evolving group-ethos and growing networks could be just beginning to influence politics on every level.

Related: Wisconsin is second in nation for school board recall attempts, driven by disputes over masking, teaching race

How three parents rose as influencers

Nedweski, Matt Foucault, and Amber Schroeder are parents to children in three different school districts: urban Kenosha, rural Somerset, and suburban Mequon-Thiensville.

Before the pandemic, none had political experience. But when their children were sent home for virtual learning and then asked to wear masks, all became frustrated with their local school boards.

Less than two years later, all have attempted to recall school board members, Foucault is now sitting on the school board, the other two are helping to organize challenges in the next school board election and Nedweski is also running for a county seat.

Foucault, a parent of three who has lived in Somerset for about 15 years, said he started paying attention to his local school board last winter when he felt it was time to reconsider the district's mask requirement. He spoke during public comment periods but didn't get the results he hoped for.

"What I started to notice was my public comment was always followed up with, 'Thank you but we'll make this decision; this is our decision.' And that just didn't sit well with me," Foucault said.

By spring, there were more parents by his side at the board meetings, asking for an end to the requirement. In June, feeling stonewalled, Foucault registered a committee to recall the only two board members eligible for recall based on how long they'd been in office.

Foucault wasn't intending to run for office. But when nobody else stepped up, he realized he might be the person for the job.

The recall effort got results with surprising speed. Foucault said it gathered 1,000 signatures, 200 more than required, within the first two and half weeks of their 60 day allowance. The incumbents resigned before the election, and Foucault ran and won unopposed, along with Lacy Oster in the other seat. He plans to run for re-election in April.

A month after Foucault registered his recall committee, Nedweski registered her own. A lifelong Kenoshan with kids in high school, Nedweski, like Foucault, had started speaking at school board meetings about COVID measures.

She had spoken for the first time during the public comment period in July 2020, calling for families to be able to opt for in-person learning for the 2020-21 school year.

"I never intended to go further than that one meeting," Nedweski said. "You know, I just wanted to say something on behalf of children who I knew may not have someone there to speak for them."

By August of this year, Nedweski was taking control of a school board meeting room, revving up parents who'd refused to socially distance in overflow rooms and prompted school board members to retreat, according to the Kenosha News. She was wearing a T-shirt from Moms for Liberty, an organization that had recruited her earlier that month. She and other parents had shown up to call for no mask requirements.

"Today it's about masks; tomorrow it's about isolating and segregating the unvaccinated," Nedweski told the clapping crowd. A handwritten sign in the crowd read, "We the parents do not consent to child muzzles."

"When that meeting was shut down," Nedweski said later, "people turned to me and said what can we do? I said the only real recourse we have now is to replace them."

Nedweski's group wasn't able to gather enough signatures to trigger a recall election. But the Kenosha chapter of Moms for Liberty has grown to more than 300 dues-paying members, and they're readying their fight for April. Nedweski is also running for a county board seat.

Days after Nedweski filed her recall paperwork, recall organizers from Schroeder's group in Mequon registered their committees. Schroeder, too, was a parent upset about pandemic safety measures affecting academic progress. She also introduced another concern that has been catching fire across the country: "critical race theory."

Schroeder and other organizers of the Mequon effort gathered enough signatures to trigger a recall election Nov. 2. Their candidates lost, but they picked up 40% of the votes in a high turnout election.

Recall efforts 'just the beginning'

After the recall failed in Mequon, Schroeder took a vacation with her kids. But soon after, she was preparing to fly to D.C. with Scarlett Johnson — who also helped organize the

recall and ran in the election — to speak to parents from around the country trying to organize similar campaigns.

The Mequon recall drew especially high national attention. Parents from at least a dozen districts around Wisconsin and beyond have reached out to Schroeder and her co-organizers, seeking advice for their own initiatives, Schroeder said.

"It's really just the beginning for this group," Schroeder said. "We're not ready to go anywhere yet."

The work by the recall groups to canvass their neighborhoods, build Facebook groups and energize like-minded voters will spill into regular school board elections in April, they say. Schroeder said her group is preparing to announce support for April candidates and looking into whether they can roll over money raised in the previous race.

On the other side, Nancy Urbani from the coalition that supported the incumbents in Mequon, said its coffers were drained by legal fees defending an accusation by Schroeder that they violated campaign finance rules — an accusation they denied and has not yet been judged by state officials. But Urbani said her group will also be supporting candidates in April.

In Kenosha, Nedweski said her group will not only be backing April candidates, but said her group recruited them.

"What the recall brought us was an opportunity to organize parents, get lots of people involved, educate our community and educate our parent base," Nedweski said. "So that gave us the ability to recruit some very, very well qualified candidates, who now we're focusing our support on for the spring election."

Spreading into other political ventures

The same bases activated in these races could throw their weight into other political battles. Nedweski's Kenosha group advocated against a city-wide mask mandate. Schroeder said she has attended events supporting Rebecca Kleefisch's run for governor.

"We recalled a school board; that was awesome. And then it didn't work. And now I'm like OK, well look at what Rebecca's doing," Schroeder said. "She's out here advocating for the same things I was advocating for."

Schroeder said while the "Restore MTSD" group that organized the recall doesn't officially back Kleefisch and some members "are not fans" of the former lieutenant governor, other members are volunteering with the campaign.

"Rebecca goes on record to say that she will put kids back in school on day one. And a lot of parents are going to listen to words like that and say that matters to me, like, done deal," Schroeder said.

For Schroeder, the politics of her local school board were the entry point but not the endpoint of her political journey. She expects the same will be true of many other recently involved parents, whose engagement in their school district led them to also pay closer attention to other government positions that may have more power.

"Where leadership does start locally, I think a lot of parents are going to realize, wait a second, maybe my governor, maybe my mayor, maybe these other people that are advocating for children in the community will have a bigger say and will be able to get things done a lot faster," Schroeder said.

In Somerset, Foucault said he doesn't at this point have political aspirations beyond the school board. He has kept his work local, where he's had plenty. He doesn't see community interest in the school board waning, though some of it is moving away from the public comment sections of board meetings and into Facebook groups.

He's noticed more people talking about whether schools have been influenced by "critical race theory," an analysis introduced by legal scholars in the 1970s about structural inequity in U.S. legal systems. Foucault doesn't believe Somerset schools teach anything like that but he shares some skepticism about how new curriculum in other districts includes teaching about the history of racism.

Likewise, Schroeder has advised other parents interested in organizing recalls or running candidates to avoid focusing on COVID.

"That's not, you know, the best recall tool; COVID changes quickly," Schroeder said.

In Mequon, Schroeder has accused the district of hiring "critical race theory consultants disguised as equity consultants" that intend to cancel AP courses and other programs that don't have enough students of color.

(No courses have, in fact, been canceled, though the district does have a goal of

"representational and equitable" student involvement in its programs. One step it has taken was to offer algebra to all eighth graders to allow more students the opportunity to qualify to take AP calculus.)

Shroeder flatly says she does not believe in the pursuit of equity — providing resources as needed so that children from different demographic groups achieve comparable outcomes. In Kenosha, Nedweski says her group is "not anti-equity-inclusion," though they are conducting a review of teacher training materials in search of critical race theory tenets.

For Nedweski, and Moms for Liberty Groups around the country, the leap from focusing on COVID to focusing on critical race theory is explained by the umbrella of "parents' rights"— rights over whether a child wears a mask, attends school in-person, or learns about racism, regardless of guidance from health officials.

"We do not believe that the Department of Public Instruction or the administration or the school board knows better than us as parents, and we do believe that we should have a say on what happens in the classroom and what our kids are being taught," Nedweski said.

Grassroots or Astroturf?

For as many community members as signed on to recalls in Wisconsin, more of them resisted. Some agreed with recall organizers on the issues but felt recalls were unduly expensive and inappropriate. Many others stood by their school board members' decisions for being in line with public health guidance and the best available research on the emerging virus.

Voters also said they worried about efforts to erase the role of racism from U.S. history, seeing the approach as weakening students' education and dangerous for the future. They were also concerned the groundswell to narrow curricula and limit access to books would further marginalize students who already lack representation. They also worried the groundswell to narrow curricula and limit access to books would further marginalize students who already lack representation.

Further, while the leaders of school board recall elections in Wisconsin came from the communities they organized in, out-of-state influences have been abundant.

While organizers insist on the grassroots nature of their efforts, others have questioned the role of outside funders and networks, depicting the local groups as being closer to

"Astroturf" — a term referring to groups whose roots are not in fact local but made to appear that way by outside organizers.

In Somerset, Foucault said he fought those accusations by keeping his campaign local. He said he didn't have outside funders and didn't network with organizations outside his community.

"I had no outside groups come in and back me," Foucault said. "I really stood by (the idea that) this is a nonpartisan seat. And you know, those outside politics or outside groups, it's not appropriate in a race such as this."

In Mequon, recall organizers took a different tack, accepting \$6,000 from Illinois Republican megadonor Richard Uihlein. Kleefisch posted about volunteers from "Team Rebecca" knocking doors in support of the recall.

But Schroeder said she's not personally involved in any organizations outside of her local group, like Moms for Liberty.

Nedweski doesn't shy from the affiliation, now serving as vice-chairperson of the Kenosha chapter.

"It's one of our goals to have a Moms for Liberty T-shirt in every school board meeting across the country," Nedweski said.

Nedweski acknowledges that her local chapter utilizes resources from the national group. Of the \$10 annual dues that members pay, half go to the local group and half go to the national group, she said.

"They do a lot with pulling public records and reviewing curriculum and trying to understand policy," Nedweski said.

As Nedweski's chapter reviews local school materials, she said they are looking to other parent groups around the country to share lists of books they want out of the curriculum. Moms for Liberty groups around the country have taken aim at books that, while often dealing with themes of race and sexual orientation, are generally targeted by highlighting portions with sexual content and calling them pornographic.

On a Moms for Liberty "watch list" obtained by a Florida reporter, some books did not contain sexual descriptions but were children's picture books — "Anti-Racist Baby" and "ABC - A Family Alphabet Book" — addressing racism and featuring LGBTQ families,

respectively.

In Kenosha county, Nedweski said parents have thus far raised concerns about at least three books: "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl," "Fun Home," and "All Boys Aren't Blue," the latter two featuring LGBTQ characters, and all depicting sexual acts. A spokesperson for the district said no books have yet undergone an official review.

In another joint nationwide effort, Moms for Liberty groups are pushing for state lawmakers to implement a "Parents' Bill of Rights" to expand parental oversight of school curricula and activities. Nedweski said her group is working with Wisconsin lawmakers to draft a state-specific version.

Nedweski said Moms for Liberty is growing exponentially daily.

"It's not going away," she said.

The new reality of board meetings

For those who've been part of school boards preceding the pandemic, the atmosphere is often foreign to the one they were first elected into. Many have quit amidst the vitriol and threats to their safety.

In September, the National School Boards Association called on officials to consider federal terrorism charges against those making threats to school board members. The Wisconsin Association of School Boards, upset with that decision, voted alongside other state chapters to stop participating in the national organization.

Andrew Maertz, a school board member in Reedsville who sits on the WASB board, said it wasn't that he's not concerned about threats to school board members. But he also didn't want the detractors to feel retaliated against.

Maertz, who first ran for school board as a senior in high school, said he hasn't seen this much attention on school boards since Act 10. As difficult as some discussions may be, he doesn't want that attention to stop.

"I hope the attention public education is getting doesn't go away. It had taken a back burner for a long time," Maertz said. "I just wish people were interested on a daily basis instead of just when something dramatic is happening."

Maertz does worry about the school board members, administrators and teachers who have left the field under stress.

"That's the concern: people who care are stepping down," he said. "Everybody's getting burnt out really fast. To see those people being broken spirited is really hard to see."

Maertz said he'll be continuing in his post and hopes others will weather the pressures.

"A lot of people suddenly became interested in school boards, not knowing really how they function. The negative attention is starting to mellow, and people are starting to realize maybe they should be involved more on a daily basis," he said. "As long as we keep having passionate people, it'll take a lot more than bumps in the road like this to break us."

Contact Rory Linnane at rory.linnane@jrn.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@RoryLinnane](https://twitter.com/RoryLinnane).