

EDUCATION

Republicans inject more than \$70,000 into Wisconsin school board races in divisive election season

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Wisconsin's state and county Republican parties have invested more than \$70,000 in candidates for school board elections around the state, while Democratic party spending fell under \$10,000, according to a Journal Sentinel analysis of finance reports filed with the state.

School board candidates are on the ballot April 5 in nearly every district, excluding Milwaukee, where board members were elected last year.

The heavy party involvement comes as leading Republican candidate for governor Rebecca Kleefisch touts education issues at the top of her platform, riding a national wave of conservative backlash over COVID precautions, specialized supports for LGBT students and students of color, and curriculum that addresses race, gender and sexual orientation.

Kleefisch herself has endorsed more than 100 school board candidates, while her Political Action Committee has, separately from the Republican party, donated \$150 each to about a dozen school board campaigns.

Democrats, while trailing dramatically in reported spending, say they're committed to defending their own favored candidates with what they said is their most robust organizing ever for local candidates in a spring election.

Devin Remiker, executive director for the Democratic Party of Wisconsin, said he expected the party's spending to look more on par with Republican spending when more finance reports are filed after the final days of the race.

"Republicans really think they have a shot and the Democratic Party is very much going to stand by folks who have been trying to do the right thing at every turn in the face of obstruction," Remiker said.

Republicans, unions focus on Waukesha

The biggest chunk of spending came from the Republican Party of Waukesha County, which sunk about \$31,000 in 15 school board races in the county.

Most significantly, the county party spent about \$9,000 supporting three Waukesha School Board candidates endorsed by the party and Kleefisch: Karrie Kozlowski, Marquell Moorer and Mark Borowski.

The Democratic parties did not report as much spending in Waukesha as of March 31, though much of the state party's work with local candidates is reflected on finance reports by small dollar amounts of in-kind donations. Waukesha School Board candidate Sarah Harrison reported a \$1.25 donation from the state party for consulting.

Remiker said the state party has supported hundreds of local candidates, sometimes with bigger ticket financial contributions for advertising, but more often with other support reflected in low-level in-kind contributions, such as including candidates on a canvassing script or offering guidance.

Of Democratic county parties that filed reports, the Eau Claire party spent the most: \$720 each on three candidates.

Teachers unions have also invested in the races, together spending about \$25,000 across the state. The most came from the southeast region of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, which spent about \$3,500 on materials and mailings supporting Waukesha School Board candidates Harrison, Greg Deets and William Baumgart.

Other groups independently funded advertising in support of certain candidates without giving directly to their campaigns. They can reveal fewer details about their funders.

A committee that has spent over \$11,000 on ads for Rock County conservative candidates, including for school boards, is listed as receiving its full funding from a corporation called Rock County First. The corporation is registered to Milton School Board member Leslie Hubert, who is not up for election.

The non-profit Blue Sky Waukesha spent nearly \$3,000 on postcards supporting Waukesha School Board candidate Amanda Roddy, who was ousted in the primary election.

Candidates skip forums, hold their own events

Buoyed by the backing of parties and other political groups, some school board candidates this year have ditched traditional community forums and opted instead to hold meet-and-greets for voters alongside allied candidates.

In the Hamilton School District, which serves Sussex and several communities in Waukesha County, parents Bridget Botts-Kastern and Valery Jahn said they were "stonewalled" trying to organize a forum for all the candidates. They needed a neutral sponsor, they said, but the parent-teacher organizations were unable or unwilling.

"Nobody wanted to touch it, is what it felt like," Jahn said.

Instead, two of the candidates attended a meet-and-greet hosted by the Republican Women of Waukesha County at the Village Bowl. The other two are scheduled to attend a rally Saturday at Village Park.

"It's very disappointing we can't just all get together and talk to the candidates and make our best decision based on the person," Botts-Kastern said.

Both of the separate events will also feature candidates for the Menomonee Falls School Board.

Stephanie Given, treasurer for the Shady Lane and Valley View PTO in Menomonee Falls, said the PTO has organized joint candidate forums for years. While all the candidates attended the first forum before the primary, the Republican-backed candidates did not attend the second.

"This was my first experience with people not opting to come," Given said.

In Cedarburg, a candidate opted out of a forum hosted by the League of Women Voters of Ozaukee because it was being held virtually.

"I declined to participate as there is no reason why this forum cannot be held live and open to the public without restrictions," Laura Stroebel wrote on Facebook.

Stroebel had participated in a meet in greet with the other Republican-backed candidates in Cedarburg, Elizabeth Charland and Richard Leach.

CRT, parents' rights and COVID

Scrolling through the platforms of the Republican-backed school board candidates, there are consistent themes aligned with recent Republican legislation to curtail COVID responses, equity efforts, and teaching about race, gender and sexual orientation.

Under the umbrella of parental rights, many candidates say they want to give parents control over COVID responses like masks, vaccination and in-person school; and they say parents should be able to view all curriculum materials and opt their children out of certain lessons.

Some signed their support to a proposed "parental bill of rights" in Wisconsin that would allow parents to sue if public schools don't meet their requests to review curricula, or if teachers use names and pronouns for students as chosen by the students rather than the parents. Mequon school board candidate Scarlett Johnson, whose campaign received \$1,800 from the Ozaukee County Republican Party, testified for the bill at the capitol.

Some of the candidates are already working on their own curriculum reviews, saying they are looking for evidence of "critical race theory," a framework for understanding systemic racism.

"The mask mandates and discussions around CRT and gender pronouns in Hamilton schools made me run for the board," Hamilton School Board candidate Rachel Ziemer said on Facebook, vowing to never require masking at school.

A spokesperson for the Republican Party of Wisconsin said the party has upped its investment in local school board races after seeing returns last year.

"After widespread school closures, mask mandates, and learning loss, conservatives are fired up to defeat school board members who serve teachers-union leaders instead of Wisconsin kids," Mark Jefferson, executive director of the state party, said in an email.

Among the Democrat-backed platforms, many candidates have focused on recovering from the pandemic with additional learning opportunities and mental health aid, while standing by equity efforts to better support marginalized students.

In Eau Claire, school board candidate Marquell Johnson, who posted an email he received calling for a "Thank You White People Day," said he would not be deterred. Johnson's campaign received \$720 in support from the Democratic Party of Eau Claire.

"If the intention of the email was to silence me, impose fear, or reaffirm my minority status, you have failed," Johnson, who is Black, wrote on Facebook. "Whether or not I'm re-elected to the school board, the voices and actions of people who value differences and affirm inclusiveness are in our community and will remain persistent in their resolve."

Election day is April 5

To find your polling place for April 5, see what's on your ballot and check your registration status, visit myvote.wi.gov. Polls are open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

To see which political parties and political action committees may have donated to candidates in your district, visit cfis.wi.gov, view filed reports, select a recent filing period and choose a registrant type.

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