

**EDUCATION**

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

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Wisconsinites have attempted more recalls of school board members during the pandemic than every state except California, part of a nationwide surge driven by political divisions over pandemic protocols and the teaching of racism and history.

The number of recall attempts against school board members this year in the U.S. — 81 petitions against 209 members so far — is double the total of any previous year tallied by Ballotpedia, a Middleton-based nonprofit.

Groups pushing for recalls, echoing nationwide Republican talking points, have said they wanted new board members who would reject guidance from health officials, make masks optional, and clamp down on teaching about the harms of racism.

Most attempts have failed. If Mequon-Thiensville residents succeed in their current recall attempt, up for a vote Nov. 2, it would be the first successful pandemic-era recall of school board members in the state, and second in the nation.

That recall effort emphasizes both key issues, with rhetoric about limiting masking efforts and "critical race theory," in line with conservative efforts to limit curriculum about structural racism.

Other recall attempts have fallen apart when petitioners failed to gather enough signatures.

Still, in some cases, targeted school board members have been threatened, stymied and felt backed into resigning during the recall attempts — then were replaced by those with opposing views.

Wisconsin is one of 12 states that allow residents to recall school board candidates without requiring specific reasons for recalls, while eight other states allow it for certain situations, according to Ballotpedia.

To trigger a recall election, Wisconsin residents must gather signatures from a quarter of the number of people in the area who voted in the last governor's election.

School boards have come into the spotlight as some of the top issues for Republican candidates in 2022 intersect with school board issues, and the education of children. That has led both Republican and Democratic officials far above the school board level to get involved in races — Republicans to unseat board members, Democrats to help incumbents.

Since March 2020, Wisconsinites have attempted recall petitions against 36 members in 16 school districts, with pandemic safety measures cited in at least 14 districts.

In California, with a population six times the size of Wisconsin, residents have attempted recalls in 28 school districts, with at least 15 relating to COVID protocols.

## Party leaders buy into recall battles

The effort in the Mequon-Thiensville School District has drawn the state Republican Party and the Democratic Party of Ozaukee County to help recruit volunteers and push out communication on behalf of candidates — taking positions opposite to the respective parties' views a decade ago.

In 2011, Democrats launched a recall campaign against then-Gov. Scott Walker, Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch and Republican lawmakers over their opposition to Walker's signature collective bargaining policy known as Act 10. Republicans, including Kleefisch, said Democrats were using the state's mechanism to recall elected officers improperly — arguing recall elections should not be used over policies but for illegal or corrupt behavior by elected officials.

Now, Kleefisch's gubernatorial campaign and other Republicans who opposed the 2011 recall effort are recruiting volunteers for the recall candidates in the Mequon-Thiensville district. And local Democrats are recruiting door knockers who are “concerned about the recall effort.”

Matt Batzel, national executive director for the conservative national group American Majority, also helped circulate recall petitions for the effort, which included getting signatures from students and athletes at Concordia University.

Handwritten postcards urging voters to back the school board incumbents are being sent to voters in the district, too — a strategy used by many Democrats in recent gubernatorial and presidential elections.

Barry Burden, director of the Elections Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said it's not uncommon for political party leaders to change their views on recall elections.

“For conservatives in Wisconsin, (they) made two key arguments against the 2012 recalls. First was that Governor Walker had only been in office for a year and deserved to have more time to prove himself before facing another election. Second was that the motivation for the recalls was merely a policy debate about labor unions and not over malfeasance in office, which is what recalls should be used for,” Burden said.

“With these rationales, conservatives could appear consistent by arguing that school board members violated law by imposing health measures, so it is about wrongdoing in office and not just a dispute about local education policy,” Burden said.

The school board recall campaigns challenge the district's COVID-19 policies, though a district survey from August also showed 73% of the 303 parents who responded supported students wearing face masks, and include accusations of declining student performance and opposition to materials being used that teach topics related to systemic racism.

“The focus on school board recalls is a fairly natural extension of the efforts of conservatives and Republicans to oppose public health mandates such as masks, vaccines, and online learning in elementary, secondary, and higher education,” Burden said. “Conservatives have been challenging these initiatives in the legislatures and in lawsuits. Elections, especially for school board where these issues have been especially contentious, are simply the next arena.”

School board recall candidate Scarlett Johnson was named to Kleefisch's campaign leadership team this year. She also is listed as a vice president of the Wisconsin chapter of No Left Turn in Education, a national group that has pushed to remove teaching materials that cover systemic racism topics.

**More:** Mequon-Thiensville School Board candidate, Kleefisch campaign team member deletes tweets on white supremacy, transgender issues

Former Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke is a member of the group's board. At a recent legislative hearing on bills that would ban lessons on systemic racism, Clarke compared the lessons to the psychedelic drug LSD and suggested teachers should be recorded in the classroom.

## First recall effort hinged on race

In Wisconsin, most recall efforts have followed debates about COVID precautions like masks and virtual learning, while some have also cited curriculum or views about race.

The first recall effort of 2020 came in Lake Mills, a small city between Milwaukee and Madison, when a disputed car collision illuminated deep divisions about racism in the community.

In July 2020, a group of young people with the “50 Miles More” march for racial justice passed through Lake Mills. After a collision between a Black member of the group and a white driver, allegations spread that it had been a purposeful, racist act by the white driver.

School board member Rachael Davies, who is white and has Black children, in a Facebook post called the driver racist and wrote about her fears for her children in the community given how the protesters were treated and hateful comments in local Facebook groups.

At the next two school board meetings, residents called for her resignation, citing police video they said showed the collision was not the fault of the white driver.

“Why did Rachael believe the protester? Is it because the protester was Black?” asked Janel Pauli.

Speakers called Davies racist against white people. One speaker disparaged Davies’ support of the protesters and argued racism was not a problem.

“I am sickened by the support given to the group who came into our community to bully and rally for no reason except to create racism where it doesn’t exist,” one speaker said at a school board meeting. “We are not racist. We never were racist.”

Some who called for Davies' resignation, including the school board president, said they were also unhappy with a Facebook post she had made about potential learning models during COVID before the board had made a decision.

Davies withstood the barrage of criticism in those meetings. But after Pauli circulated a recall petition, Davies resigned. She was replaced by a candidate who, when asked in a candidate forum how the board should respond to growing diversity, shared no specific ideas.

## **Warnings about ‘dark, deep pockets’**

Shortly after the recall effort against Davies, parents in Oconomowoc took up an effort against three school board members who supported their superintendent's hybrid in-class and virtual instruction plan in the fall of 2020. The recall supporters wanted students back fully in class.

Similar to Lake Mills, the parents never gathered enough signatures. But months later, one of the members, Juliet Steitzer was defeated in the April 2021 election by Matt Carrico, backed by Kleefisch's political action committee.

Another candidate in the same race, Alexandra Schweitzer, also was backed by Kleefisch's PAC, including a \$400 donation. Her campaign also reported \$500 from former sheriff Clarke and \$3,200 from the Republican Party of Wisconsin. Schweitzer didn't get as many votes as Carrico and was not elected.

In August, another member who'd been targeted by the Oconomowoc recall, Kim Herro, resigned. She announced a joint resignation with two other board members, Dan Raasch and Rick Grothaus, who had been too new to recall in the 2020 effort. In a joint statement, they denounced the remaining board members for their "unwillingness to collaborate in good faith."

Herro, though she said she identified as the most "pure Republican" on the board, said she was depicted as leftist and "crazy" as people spread rumors that she had health problems. She had supported making a strong recommendation for students to wear masks.

"All of the sudden, Dan was dangerous and I was crazy," Herro said. “We are flaming liberals out to get kids and sell them to the Communist Party.”

Raasch said resigning felt like the only option to bring public attention to the shift of power on the board and the way he and other members felt they lacked any hand in decision-making.

"We have to wake up the community to say there's forces that are really trying to control your school board," he said. "You have dark, deep pockets entering the political sphere in Oconomowoc and in other districts."

Grothaus, who was interviewed by CNN and other news outlets, said he thinks resigning was the right decision for the attention it brought to the board's dysfunction.

"Resigning from the school board has actually caused conversations to happen," he said. "Are they big enough, deep enough, enough people? I don't know, yet but at least we've contributed to the conversation."

## Resignations over masks

Resignations have followed recall attempts in other districts, too, though not always with the same splash.

Appleton School Board member Leah Olson resigned in December, the same month that a recall effort failed against her and two other board members. The recall committee was protesting virtual learning. Olson didn't comment on the recall effort in her resignation.

In Somerset, where a recall committee did gather enough signatures to trigger an election for two school board positions in September, both of the targeted board members resigned. Both members had supported a mask requirement, according to news reports. Both were replaced by candidates who opposed mask mandates.

"COVID has brought out the worst in our community and the worst in our district," board member Patricia Jo Forsberg said in UpNorthNews. "Members of our board and the administrators are so afraid of the special interest groups in the community that they are only acting in their own best interests, to save their faces, in spite of the responsibility to the children, the district, and the community."

Similarly, two board members in Sparta who supported a mask requirement, Eric Soldberg and Nancy Sikorsky, resigned in September while a recall effort against them was underway.

Sikorsky told the Monroe County Herald that she and Soldberg had received threats after voting for the mandate.

In other communities, board members have weathered recall threats and are still serving on their boards. In Amery, four board members hung onto their seats despite recall attempts from residents opposing masks and critical race theory. They failed to collect enough signatures.

A recall effort against four board members in Wisconsin Rapids — fueled by parents frustrated with masks, district academic performance and how the district approaches teaching about race and diversity — failed to collect enough signatures.

In Waupaca, residents started a recall effort against school board member Patrick Phair after he used the f-word in criticizing the district's mask-optional policy, according to Waupaca County News. Shortly before recall signatures were due in August, Phair voted for a plan requiring facemasks. He told Waupaca County News recall organizers were satisfied.

"I was approached by parents that were part of the recall committee and they felt that after the school board meeting they felt that the message was heard and they decided not to go through with the rally to finish it out," recall organizer Shelly Morzfeld said.

## 'My family does not feel safe'

In addition to the formal recall efforts, other pressures on board members have also led to recent resignations.

Beaver Dam school board member Tony Klatt said he resigned in September because he was feeling unsafe after he voted for mask requirements.

"When there is talk of protesting my house and someone later pulls in front and takes a picture of my address while my daughter is home alone, she does not feel safe," he wrote on Facebook. "When a car sits running in front of my house late at night on a non-thoroughfare, my family does not feel safe."

Four board members have resigned in Beloit this year, with some citing frustrations with board conflicts.

Two North Fond du Lac board members resigned in September after a recommendation to require masks was never brought to a vote, frustrating both members who in resignation letters said district leaders were operating "out of fear" in response to protests.

Just days earlier, two board members resigned in neighboring Fond du Lac. One of the members, Nick Teifke, had voted with the majority of the board to keep masks optional but said he was conflicted about going against CDC guidance.

"We have all been put in impossible positions and forced to make no-win decisions that have impacted all our students, staff and families," Teifke said in a resignation letter. "While I do not regret many of the decisions I have made, I do regret that at times I did not fight harder to be a voice for families that believe in a safe learning and working environment."

## **More recalls attempts underway**

Several recall attempts are still underway.

In Kenosha, residents are in the final stretch of gathering signatures against Yolanda Adams who they said has "abdicated her voting rights to the county health director" by voting on COVID protocols in line with recommendations from health officials.

The effort in Kenosha was launched by Amanda Nedweski, a local resident who registered with an email address from Moms for Liberty, a national group that has opposed mask mandates and critical race theory.

In Stevens Point, signatures are due Nov. 2 for a recall attempt against five board members by community members who oppose mask requirements.

Most recently, Manitowoc residents rallied last week for the recall of two board members who they blamed for mask requirements.

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