

EDUCATION

Here's who's behind the school board postcards, Facebook ads and door knockers

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Residents sorting through their mail in the far reaches of Wisconsin this month found very similar postcards advertising different school board candidates running in their local school board races.

The ads implied the candidates would end curriculum about gender and white privilege, and promote more parental control over school board and teacher decisions. At the bottom they all read: "Paid for by the 1776 Project PAC."

Many of the candidates said they were as surprised as everyone else to see their names on the mailers.

While Wisconsin's political party leaders are laser focused on the state Supreme Court race, marking a shift after monumental investments last year in school board candidates, other groups are just ramping up — from seasoned megadonors to local parents learning for the first time how to file finance reports.

Here are some of the groups making plays in this election cycle.

1776 Project

The 1776 Project is a political action committee funded most heavily by another group, Restoration PAC, which is largely funded by GOP mega-donor Richard Uihlein. He and his wife, Elizabeth Uihlein, co-owners of the Uline packaging company in Pleasant Prairie, are among the biggest Republican financial supporters in the country.

Political action committees, also known as PACs, are organizations that can contribute funds directly to candidates' committees or sponsor their own advertisements and other efforts that support or oppose candidates. They must disclose their donors and are subject to limits on how much they can contribute to individual candidates.

The 1776 Project PAC was launched in 2021 to support candidates who vow to overturn any teaching of critical race theory or use of the 1619 Project, a New York Times Magazine piece with curriculum by the Pulitzer Center about the history of slavery. The PAC also backs any reform that “promotes a patriotic vision of America and its history,” according to its website.

The PAC has endorsed about 50 candidates in 28 school districts in Wisconsin. It has not reported donations to candidates' campaigns but has created and distributed mailers about them, hitting points about transparent school board operations and removing curriculum about race and gender.

When PACs spend money on their own independent efforts to support candidates, without coordination with those candidates, they do not have to report it as a contribution to the candidates.

Many of the endorsed candidates have said they had no contact with the PAC.

In the Kettle Moraine School District, Amy Richards said while the group's endorsement was unexpected, she wasn't upset by it and generally agreed with the messaging, though she said she didn't think “secret voting” was a problem in Kettle Moraine, as the mailer alleged.

In Pulaski, school board candidate Corey Juelich was less pleasantly surprised. In a Facebook post, he said it was terrible that an organization was speaking on his behalf without his permission and said many issues mentioned in the postcard were not issues in the district.

In the Elmbrook School District, candidate Gregg Eberhardt advertised the endorsement on his candidate Facebook page, while candidate Sam Hughes posted a clarification that he had no knowledge that the mailer would be going out.

Waukesha School Board candidates David Wadd, Bette Koenig and Corey Montiho all posted on their Facebook pages that they did not contact the 1776 PAC and they did not seek the group's endorsement.

On Wednesday afternoon, the 1776 PAC filed a finance report with the Wisconsin Ethics Commission that did not account for the postcards but did note spending about \$6,360 on text messaging in support of 31 candidates for school board in Wisconsin.

Democratic and Republican parties

In last spring's school board elections, Republicans celebrated "flipping" boards to Republican majorities after investing heavily in conservative candidates that ousted incumbents around the state. This year, the approach looks different.

In March last year, the state party reported contributing over \$6,000 to school board candidates and funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars to its county parties, which, in turn, further supported school board candidates. In the biggest effort, the state party sent \$40,000 to the Waukesha County party, which, in turn, spent over \$30,000 on school board candidates.

This year, despite more than doubling its fundraising and bringing in over \$1.8 million, the party didn't report any direct contributions to school board candidates or the county parties.

With the state Supreme Court race dominating the ballot, state party chair Mark Jefferson said the party is making its biggest statewide voter turnout push ever. He said the party is still supporting local candidates by bundling them into their other efforts: A door-knocker who is out promoting court candidate Dan Kelly might also mention the local Republican school board candidate.

Candidates who win the party's favor are added to its phone call scripts, brochures, texts, Facebook pages and canvasser conversations, Jefferson said. The party also supplies the candidates' campaigns with contact information for voters that tend to vote red.

On the other side of the aisle, Democratic Party of Wisconsin communications director Joe Oslund said he thinks the party is keeping pace with organizing by the Republicans, while also focusing on the court race as the party's "first, second and third priority."

On the state party's March finance report, it reported raising over \$10.4 million this year, and the only school board candidate it gave to directly was Missy Zombor in Milwaukee, giving her campaign \$1,200.

It did funnel thousands of dollars through its county parties, some of which supported school board candidates. It also reported in-kind contributions, like consulting services, valued at over \$1,000 for candidates in Wausau, Stevens Point, Sheboygan, La Crosse, Wauwatosa and Superior, and over \$2,000 for candidates in Eau Claire and Appleton. It also invested nearly \$5,000 in Yolanda Adams in Kenosha, where the county Republican party has invested about \$2,300 in Lamar Madison.

Oslund said the party is backing a mix of incumbents and new candidates for school boards around the state. Similar to Jefferson, he hopes their statewide voter turnout work will also benefit left-leaning local candidates.

Waukesha's WisRed

The Waukesha County Republican Party has been particularly active in school board elections and in 2021, spun off a political action committee called “WisRed.”

As of January, the group hadn't reported any donations directly to candidates' campaigns, but reported spending about \$73,000 over the past year, largely on media and consulting. The group's March report is not yet in the state's reporting system.

In December, WisRed advertised its “vetting board” for 2023 elections, saying it was interviewing candidates and asking interested candidates to contact them. The group has since stamped its logo on flyers for school board candidates throughout the county.

WisRed's spring 2023 voter guide lists 38 school board candidates that it supports. The group also supports candidates for county, municipal and court races.

Last year, a Menomonee Falls parent-teacher organization, which had organized candidate forums for years, saw candidates opt out for the first time, and this year the group didn't host one. Looking to fill the void, resident Kathy McBride said she and other residents tried to organize a forum but the WisRed-backed candidates wouldn't participate. They then hosted their own meet-and-greet at a bowling alley the same night the forum would have been held.

WisRed's organizing goes beyond campaigning. After last spring's election, the group posted in April about forming a “Waukesha County Council,” which would include one member from each elected board in Waukesha County to “ensure collaborative conservative support throughout the county.”

That May, records obtained by the Journal Sentinel show Chris Slinker, who was listed on the WisRed vetting board, reached out to school board members inviting them to the “WISRED Council,” which he said would involve regular meetings with party officials and higher education officials.

WisRed treasurer Patricia Maynard and Waukesha County Republican Party Chair Terry Dittrich did not return interview requests from the Journal Sentinel about the PAC or council.

Parents and other groups

Since disagreements about masking and COVID responses brought flocks of parents to school board meetings, many of them stayed engaged as national uproar shifted against equity efforts, teaching about American racism, and books or curriculum related to sexual orientation and gender.

Parents on all sides met in lines for the microphone and while walking to their cars. They formed email chains and Facebook groups. And some are now navigating processes for forming nonprofits and filing finance reports to sink their own dollars into school board races.

In January, Kettle Moraine parents Christine DeMaster and Mandy Kastner, who hadn't known each other before the pandemic, signed their names on a registration statement for a new independent expenditure committee, the Kettle Moraine Alliance.

As an independent expenditure committee, the group has no limits on the size of donations it can collect or the amount it can spend in support of candidates, but it is not allowed to coordinate with candidates on its spending.

DeMaster has long identified as an evangelical Christian who always voted Republican, though she's not sure how to categorize herself anymore. Kastner leans left. Both said they want to see "nonpartisan" school board candidates.

All four candidates running for two seats on the school board self-identify as conservative, but DeMaster and Kastner said the Alliance supports Jay Crouse and JJ Andrews because they seem to be less extreme in their views. The other two candidates, Amy Richards and Tracy Brymer, are backed by WisRed.

The Alliance has raised over \$10,000 that it has used for mailers, online advertisements, yard signs and other material supporting Crouse and Andrews. The Republican Party of Waukesha County has spent at least \$2,800 on its candidates, not including the work by WisRed.

Richards comes from another parent group in Kettle Moraine, "Parent Up! KMSD," a private Facebook group formed in 2021 that leans more conservative. Richards, a co-administrator of the group, said it hasn't formalized as a nonprofit or done any campaign fundraising, but it has served as a sounding board. To get into the group, Facebook users are first asked to answer whether they believe parents have "fundamental rights relating to a child's religion, medical care and records and education."

In Menomonee Falls, Andy Guss said he's thinking about formalizing a group he co-leads called Grassroots Menomonee Falls Area, which formed in 2022. He described the group as mostly progressive but nonpartisan, launched in reaction to the rise of Republican organizing; the county party has spent over \$2,000 supporting its school board candidates there this year. Volunteers with the Grassroots group have been knocking on doors and put together a voter guide.

Farther west in Waukesha County, another group called "Come Together Lake Country" has ventured into fundraising and spent about \$7,000 on printing and mailing postcards to support 10 candidates for the Arrowhead Union High School district and seven K-8 feeder districts. In the same districts, the Republican Party of Waukesha County donated about \$5,000 collectively to opposing candidates, not including work by WisRed.

Another group based in Waukesha County, Blue Sky Waukesha, has "recommended" 23 candidates for school boards in the county. All of them are opposing candidates endorsed by WisRed, with the exception of Robert Bohmann, who is supported by both groups in his campaign in Muskego-Norway.

Unions

School staff who opt to pay union dues in Wisconsin contribute to their own local PACS and the statewide PAC of the Wisconsin Education Association Council.

The statewide WEAC PAC didn't report contributions to school board candidates this year, instead contributing to the state Democratic Party and the campaign for state Supreme Court candidate Janet Protasiewicz.

The regional WEAC PACs did contribute to school board candidates, with the southeast suburban region contributing \$400 each to seven candidates: Connie Kincaide in Cedarburg, Michael Pickett in Germantown, Sara Grunzel in Richmond, Diane Voit in Waukesha, Patrick Hintz in South Milwaukee, Kathleen Wied-Vincent in Greendale and Nichole Conklin in Cudahy.

The southeast regional WEAC PAC also contributed \$3,000 last spring to Waukesha United, which this year gave about \$900 to Voit, the only candidate for the Waukesha School Board who isn't backed by the Republican Party.

The Milwaukee Teachers Education Association invested more heavily, spending about \$78,000 on postcards and digital ads in support of Milwaukee School Board candidates

Missy Zombor, Gabi Hart, Marva Herndon, Megan O'Halloran and Erika Siensen.

How to find out who backs candidates in your district

Anyone can request the finance reports filed by school board candidates by emailing the clerk for their school district.

You can also browse reports filed by political parties, political action committees and other organizations through the state's campaign finance database.

Many Democratic and Republican county parties have their own guides of candidates who've won their endorsements, which you can generally find on the county party websites.

See who is on your ballot and how to vote at myvote.wi.gov.