

Recall Showdown in Reed City

The Reed City Area Public Schools Board of Education last June voted unanimously to contract out its food and custodial services. The move was expected to save the schools \$300,000 — on top of the \$5.2 million in cost savings the board approved over the past few years.

But eliminating dues-paying union jobs has repercussions. Under the guidance of the Michigan Education Association, a recall was organized by Debbie Todd, a former school board candidate, against four school board members who voted for privatization. All four — Rich Saladin, Mary Lou Proefrock, Sheri Thompson and Brian Zias — were recalled.

This strategy is common in MEA districts. The union also tried getting recalls off the ground in Southfield, but that effort fizzled when organizers failed to submit signatures. A 2007 petition against a Grand Rapids Public Schools board member failed after receiving only three signatures. A recall has been put into motion in Gladstone as well. In November, Wayne-Westland had recall petition language approved.

Prior to Reed City's decision to contract out, the MEA worked its box of anti-privatization tools. It bought and distributed yard signs, had members and friends write letters to the editor in local papers, and packed board meetings with people opposing privatization. These tactics have long been used to battle privatization in districts across the state.

The MEA even purchased ads in local papers, claiming that the move would lead to: "permanent loss of 40 Reed City jobs," "No guarantee of promised savings," and "No school control over private companies."

The anti-privatization campaign failed. Without providing concessions at the bargaining table, Reed City, which was facing expenses exceeding revenue by \$890,000 at the time, voted to contract out its custodial services to Grand Rapids Building Services and its food services to Chartwells School Dining.

Looking back, the MEA's claims have proven false. There were only 26 employees affected by the move, instead of 40 listed. And those jobs weren't lost — most of the positions were filled by the contractors. In fact, the contractors are using more full-time equivalent employees than the district had been using. And some of the former school employees were hired by the contractors. Of the custodial employees, two applied to the contractor and were hired, and six of the food service employees were hired. Indeed, one rehired employee even told *The Big Rapids Pioneer* that, "I like it working with food service, and I think (the students are reacting) fairly well. There's positive things about it." Savings are starting to materialize as well. Reed City's food service program has listed a September

and October profit of \$30,700, and the district expects its food services to break even — something that it hasn't done in more than eight years. Typically, the district provided a \$25,000 to \$35,000 annual subsidy for the program.

The MEA took that as a sign that it needed to send a message to the school board and other boards thinking of privatizing. The MEA has a vested interest in maintaining school boards that do not consider altering the employment situation of its members, regardless of its effect on school finances. In this case, Reed City used the savings from contracting to hire a new kindergarten teacher, a new second-grade teacher, and a physical education teacher. The last allows elementary students to take physical education every day.

But organizers worked to approve a petition, gather signatures and advertise the recall vote (including radio ads). The Education Action Group, which is devoted to helping school boards fight union interests, took out ads in local papers highlighting union motives. The Nov. 4 recalls, however, succeeded by an average of 51-49 percent.

"All this recall does is make the school boards in this ISD afraid to make tough decisions," said Rich Saladin, one of the recalled board members.

There is a bright spot for cost-conscious board members: the recall language never mentioned privatization. It instead pointed at board members approving the superintendent's contract, not cutting administrative pay (a claim that was inaccurate), and not considering input at board meetings. But in effect, this was about retribution against Superintendent Steven Westhoff and fueled by the decision to contract out. A spokesman for the support staff negotiating team told *The Big Rapids Pioneer*, "We didn't want to recall the four board members. We wanted to recall Westhoff."

Indeed, before the recall issue arose, the organizer even praised the superintendent publicly at a board meeting for his understanding of special education issues. And since the superintendent also performs collective bargaining agreement negotiations, the superintendent helped save the district approximately \$25,000 in legal fees per contract.

The big question is what the students at Reed City get out of this recall. It doesn't look like anything positive will result. The school board will be without experienced and understanding board members who provided a combined 47 years of service. They have also lost members who have put educating students ahead of both their professional careers and their public esteem. [MPRI](#)



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