



FINAL ON THE OUTSIDE



SPORTS

Big Brown doesn't have a favorable post position, but he's the favorite in Saturday's Kentucky Derby. D1

Union role stirs GRPS board race

TEACHERS' INVOLVEMENT IS CAMPAIGN ISSUE

BY DAVE MURRAY
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GRAND RAPIDS — A year after two incumbents ran unopposed, the race for the Grand Rapids school board features seven candidates, a billboard, slick Web sites and mailings, and an outside group extending help to

people who did not ask for it. Shows what a little labor unrest can do.

Drivers along U.S. 131 today will see a billboard reading, "Taxpayers or union bosses: Find out who wants control of GR schools," paid for by the Education Action Group, Muskegon-based activists who are critical of

**TAXPAYERS
OR
UNION BOSSES ?**
Find out who wants control
of GR Schools
MEExposed.com
Paid for by Education Action Group
231-740-8942

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teachers unions.

The EAG has a similar anti-union message — this time with a photo of a cigar-chomping tough guy — that should hit residential mailboxes before Tuesday's election.

Outside Influence: This billboard message was paid for by a Muskegon-based group critical of teacher unions. The group also is mailing a brochure to Grand Rapids households.

That follows a series of mailings from the Grand Rapids Education Association, which is embroiled in a contract dispute with the district and loud debates over school safety. The GREA is recommending three candidates, who its leaders say are not union plants but people with open minds.

Candidates say they worry the continuing drama with the union and Superintendent Bernard Taylor is over-

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shadowing issues such as improving schools and a potential tax increase to replace and renovate buildings.

Two incumbents, the Rev. Kenneth Hoskins and Luis Pena, are seeking four-year terms. They are challenged by Jane Gietzen, a Spectrum Health administrator; Gordon Griffin, a retired principal; and Derrick Martin, a Grand Valley State University student.

Incumbent Senita Leneer, who was tapped to replace Jim Rinck in October, wants to finish the year left in Rinck's term. She is challenged by Tony Baker, a Ferris State University associate professor.

Griffin, Martin and Baker are supported by the GREA.

But Gietzen has the backing of some union members -- calling themselves "Teachers for Gietzen" -- who are breaking ranks and bemoaning the union's actions.

"Negative political campaigns, particularly at the school board level, have no part in Grand Rapids politics," North Park Elementary teacher Dave Huyser said. "It's disheartening that the GREA would resort to such measures, and we urge its leaders to stop these attacks and let voters base their choices on issues and credentials."

Gietzen is far and away the leading fundraiser, with nearly \$10,000 from a donor's list that boasts educators and business leaders.

The EAG isn't endorsing candidates, although Kyle Olson, vice president of strategy, acknowledges incumbents are the likely beneficiaries of his billboards and post cards -- even though they didn't ask for assistance.

The Grand Rapids union has worked without a contract since the start of the school year, and the EAG has sided with the administration through mailings and press releases. Olson accuses the union of trying to stack the school board with sympathizers who will push for a lucrative pact and stall high school reforms.

"Because of the tactics and behavior of the union president and staff and the fact that they have come out so fervently in support of these individuals, we believe these candidates would simply be an extension of the MEA and GREA," he said. "It is up to voters to decide if they want the school board to be a balance to or an appendage of the school employees union."

But GREA President Paul Helder said the union isn't looking for puppets.

"Of course we have an interest in a school board race. We're teachers," Helder said. "But the idea of us looking to install some sort of shadow government is just asinine and disingenuous. The people we are recommending are basically the only ones who said, 'We all need to sit down and talk collaboratively.'"

Helder said EAG organizers "like to conveniently forget that our over 1,700 members are taxpayers, too. We live here. We work here. We're not paid political hacks from somewhere else with an ax to grind."

Incumbents said they were unaware of the EAG's involvement and have been stung by some of the union criticism.

Pena was backed by the union when he sought his first term, but has fallen out of favor as he seeks a third win.

"The union wants to put people on the board that it can control," he said. Hoskins, seeking a second term, bristled at a union letter that called him a rubber stamp for the superintendent. He said the union has depicted him as "anti-teacher, and that's just crazy."

And Leneer, who heads the human resources department for Blue Cross Blue Shield and Blue Care Network of Michigan, said her professional skills would help both sides.

GREA-backed candidates said an endorsement doesn't mean they signed up to do the union's bidding.

"I have no intention of being controlled by anybody," said Martin, the GVSU student. He recently was employed by the university until accusing his boss -- school board member Arnie Smithalexander -- of campaign law violations. A state probe is ongoing, but GVSU determined the actions of Smithalexander and Martin were minor violations.

Baker, a sociology professor, is an MEA member and said he appreciates generous health benefits. But that doesn't mean he would automatically favor the union.

"I would sit and look at the budget like everyone else," he said.

Griffin said he enjoyed "a great deal of support" from the GREA and labor groups but said he's not taking marching orders. A teacher and principal in city schools for 30 years, Griffin said the board lacks someone with an educator's perspective.

"I want to see myself as sort of a mediator," he said. "We have to come to some compromise, with some honest fact-finding to bring everybody back together."