

# No Standing News

Since we have no standing, we stand with those left standing.

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## The Hunt for the “Silent Supermajority”

**Enough is Enough!** Last spring at the beginning of the levy campaign, we said we hoped the public debate of school finances and the tax increase could rise above the usual “do it for the kiddies” level, but it didn’t. Ewing immediately threatened to fire 30 classroom teachers (which the board had never voted to do) and cram the kids into classrooms like sardines. The newspaper did wall-to-wall “news” coverage of our cute kids day after day, week after week with dire predictions about how “the children” would suffer if voters were mean and selfish. The Business Partners and the Committee spin room churned out attack letters (two were written by school employees who live out of the district, don’t vote and don’t pay taxes here); teachers manned calling committees, railing against anyone cruel and unfeeling enough not to “do it for the children.” A few teachers sunk low enough to tell the kids their favorite activities would be cut if they didn’t get their parents to vote for the levy. It was a campaign of cheap shots. In the name of “the kiddies” the end, they told themselves, justified the means. We thought it was odd that not once did we hear the school board or the Superintendents - all of whom claim to be devoted to the welfare of “the children” - declare that if the levy failed they would sacrifice board spending or cut

executive salaries to protect “the children.” That was never on the table.

**The dramatic exit.** On December 4th, Superintendent Ewing, who had scored big career points with the levy victory, announced he was leaving to go to a district that is only 4800 students - just about the same as ours. He says it’s because of “bad chemistry” and because he can’t get along with a board that has “left the realm of visionary planning” and is “interfering with day-to-day operations.” What bunk! No one interferes with Larry Ewing; the board turned everything over to him years ago. They don’t give him orders; they ask him how they should vote. The very worst he has had to suffer are some complaints from a minority of board members about the budget process. Ewing and Westbrook have arrogantly refused to make any changes in “their” budget. They are still sulking about the one change Wilkerson (backed up by the law and the board attorney) forced them to make so they would at least be paying bills legally. Following the law is bad chemistry? Since Ralph Wilkerson was drawn and quartered in August for violating the “One Voice” gag rule, there have been only one or two mild protests by the newest board members, Blum and Burns, against doing things The

Ewing Way. They seem to have learned the August lesson and haven’t raised the issue of revising the budget system again. Bullying works.

**The encores.** The next day, in an emotional reaction to Ewing’s resignation, board members Annie Bass and Dana Rapier announced they would run for re-election in April - apparently to continue their fallen leader’s legacy. They are making this sacrifice “for the children” with the added flourish that they must run again to “protect the staff.” Judging by our bank balances we thought the staff was now very well provided for. What else do they need to be protected from and how much will this one cost us? If the tone here is any indication, we’re looking at an election campaign with no rational debate and discussion of district issues but a lot of hiding behind “the children” and “the staff.”

The other piece of high drama was when Ewing in his resignation and Bass and Rapier in their announcement, issued an obviously rehearsed call to arms for the “Silent Supermajority” to “step forward.” What is a silent supermajority? What do they plan for this Supermajority to do if they show up? Dana Rapier says it’s so “*we (can) be empowered by the community.*” Empowered to

do what? She says they need the “*silent majority* (that’s the silent “supermajority” Dana - check the script) *desperately to come forward. Our children need them.*” Desperately to come forward? Have they considered the possibility that the “silent supermajority” has already come forward and when they did they signed the audit petition?

**Poisoning the water.** Is Ewing leaving because of “bad chemistry”? Well if he is he sure gives up easily because he’s only had the one bad “chemical” on the board and his name is Ralph. The rest of them purr like pussycats. The “chemistry” excuse isn’t selling well in the community; everyone seems to be of the opinion that he’s leaving because of the “A” word. The ink is barely dry on his very generous three-year contract and the Ft. Osage school district is about the same size and budget, which makes this a lateral career move given the cost of living differential between Rolla and Independence. But before Ewing leaves he will do us one last ‘favor.’ He intends to control the search for a new Superintendent and he has the disciples on board to do it. Randy Stratman (who isn’t going to run again) is just real tickled to have Ewing (who won’t be here either) pick a new Superintendent for everybody else to live with when they’re both gone. Yes-sir-re-bob that’s a dandy idea.

Ewing’s other legacy is that he has been trying to poison the audit results before the auditors get here. Ewing started spin doctoring the audit as soon as the petitions started circulating, and all the time he was looking for a new job! The new

Superintendent will, no doubt, be advised by his departing benefactor to blow off the state audit. Ewing’s weak line is that it doesn’t matter what the audit finds because the auditor has no power to force the board to change. Ewing must have assumed he would be safely in Ft. Osage when the board has to face the audit music but he may have miscalculated: The auditors could be here before June. This is how it will work.

**Ignoring is easier said than done.** It’s quite true, except for embezzlement and fraud the state auditor can’t force the school board to do anything. All State Auditor Claire McCaskill and her very experienced auditors can do is point out what laws the board and administration have been flagrantly violating, what damage has been done to the district because of it and how much tax money has been wasted while our board has been off “visioning” with their Guru John Carver’s failed management experiment.

When the audit is finished, the auditors will give a draft of their findings to the board and the board *must respond in writing* explaining what they plan to do to correct each deficiency. This is called public accountability and it’s pretty hard to ignore an audit when you have to think up all those excuses. They just can’t keep saying over and over “We empowered Larry to do that stuff because we were busy visioning.”

Next, an announcement will be made to media across the state that they will be holding a public meeting in Rolla to announce the results of the

state audit. At the meeting the public can have a copy of the audit and see how their board responded. The audit team conducts their own meeting - for once there won’t be any MSBA facilitators around to tell us what we think. The audit team will explain their findings and answer all questions to, what is typically, a large crowd of taxpayers and employees. Channel 16 will broadcast it to an interested audience who won’t have to rely on a watered down interpretation of the results by the local newspaper. Will our school board really be sitting up there “ignoring”? Some teachers and staff, if they pay close attention, may begin to figure out where the cream off the top of the budget has been going all these years while they were told there was no money for raises or teaching supplies (the smart ones have always known). Parents may learn why they have been shelling out constantly for their kids’ “free” public education and taxpayers may hear about budget waste that should have been eliminated before they were asked for higher taxes. Ignoring a state audit is easy until the curtain goes up.

**The Young and the Foolish.** We don’t think there will be any popular uprising of the “Silent Supermajority” to beg Superintendent Ewing to stay or to soothe the wounded egos of Bass and Rapiere. In this test run of their campaign excuses, they claim they need more time to get it together because the board is “*young and inexperienced.*” We guess this is a reference to the election of three new members in the last two years. So what? Elected bodies change all the time; in a democracy they’re designed to do that. We will grant

that they are inexperienced but that's their own fault. Between them, Bass and Rapier have had a total of 15 years to get it together and that's old in dog years and board years. How much longer does the public have to wait for this board to get old enough and experienced enough to get a grip? Elected officials aren't supposed to sit around with their heads in the clouds "visioning." (What IS that anyway?) They're supposed to work hard to keep the district gears running smoothly so the teachers can concentrate on teaching. It's just that simple. Like the captain of a ship they're supposed to check on everything, question everything and try to leave little to chance so the district won't run aground. But the incumbents keep saying it's better to 'empower' the crew and let them make all the decisions – the Captain of the Exxon Valdez thought so too. Can you imagine what would happen if the state legislature said they were going to leave the budget and lawmaking to staff they had "empowered" because they needed to spend more time in the "realm of visionary planning"? We'd have them all locked up.

The incumbent's dilemma. Bass and Rapier will have to defend their records. That's what incumbents do. Their previous elections were about tea parties and slogans; but the stakes are higher this time. If the audit is finished before the April 2 election, the contents will provide very specific questions for voters to ask during the campaign. A state audit is the granddaddy of all audit management letters. Only last August, Bass and Rapier demanded that Wilkerson tell them what an audit management letter was – after

all their years on the board they really didn't know! In this election they will have to come up with something more substantive than that we should re-elect them "for the children." How will they explain how the board makes budget decisions and sets spending priorities? They don't know how it's done because they "empowered" Ewing and Westbrook to make them. If this was a knee-jerk reaction to his resignation (and not just a trial balloon to test campaign support) it may not have occurred to Bass and Rapier that there are already about 1,300 votes out there that they aren't going to get.

Ewing also complained that the board wouldn't pick a date for their self-evaluation when he would be in town. If they're evaluating themselves why does he have to be there? And why are they wasting good money on an MSBA facilitator to help them do a self-evaluation? Thirteen hundred registered voters already did one evaluation on this board's performance, the auditor will do one on management and in April they will get another evaluation by the voters - the only one that counts. Even the belated RDN pulse poll asking if their readers think the school district needs a state audit was running 75-78% in favor of the audit before it was taken off.

Since the levy election last April, Ewing and some board members have been behaving, and spending, as if their narrow levy victory was a popular mandate. Now they're waiting for the "Supermajority" to "validate" their record and their laissez faire governance experiment. The folks in Silicon Valley have an

expression for people who begin to believe their own hype. They say they've been "smoking their own dope." When, in less than eight weeks (and that was before the tax bills hit) 1,300 citizens sign a petition for a state audit, that's not just idle curiosity, it's a message that it's time for the board and administration to get serious and stop "smoking their own dope."

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