

## Coming Together through Public School Choice

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## LA CROSSE: ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S DRIVE TO CREATE SOCIOECONOMIC BALANCE

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**A**s educators have recognized a growing disparity in school performance among students, they've increasingly noted the differences related to the socioeconomic background of families. Simply put, the "haves" generally had higher test scores than the "have nots." Research has also shown that schools in which a majority of students were middle class seemed to have a positive impact on lower-income students' achievement, as compared with schools in which nearly all the students lived in poverty or near poverty. At the same time, having more of a socioeconomic balance did not adversely affect the performance of higher-income students. Could a district use this research to improve student performance by intentionally changing the socioeconomic balance in its schools?

This paper describes the efforts of one small Midwestern school district—the school district of La Crosse, Wisconsin—that attempted to do just that. In the early 1990s, when the district recognized it would need to bus more students in order to fill two newly constructed schools, district administrators saw a new transportation plan as an opportunity to better balance the student population by socioeconomic status and improve student learning.

Opposition to the district's plan arose almost immediately, leading opponents of the plan to launch a recall of school board members who favored the plan. What followed was more than a year of political turmoil, which was covered in national media, including the *New York Times* and ABC's *Nightline*. Three anti-busing candidates were elected to the school board in the regular election. Later, four other members of the board were recalled in a special election and were replaced with

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anti-busing candidates who also sought the removal of the superintendent and his two top deputies. The tide turned nine months after the recall, with those board members replaced by two candidates who had supported the socioeconomic plan and another supporter from LaCrosse's low-income Hmong community.

This paper is based on interviews with key players, an extensive search of local newspaper accounts, and my own observations as a political writer, reporter, and editorial writer in La Crosse for the past twenty-six years. It examines how the socioeconomic balance plan came into being, the political debate it stirred, and the impact of that debate on La Crosse schools ten years later.

## THE SETTING

La Crosse is a city of 51,000, surrounded by a suburban area of about 40,000. The city is set between the Mississippi River on the west and a line of bluffs on the east. It is a strikingly beautiful area, but the central city is showing its age. Being hemmed in by the river and the bluffs means new housing generally must be built outside the city's borders, as there is little open land within the city limits. In fact, when it came time to build new elementary schools, adequate sites also were available only outside of the city. (Building inside the district would have taken many homes off the property tax rolls.)

Two decades ago major retailers moved from the downtown to an area northeast of the city, which now has a regional mall, three large supermarkets, motels, restaurants, and "big-box" retailers such as Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, and Best Buy.

The La Crosse River and a large marsh divide La Crosse into two parts. The smaller north side is heavily blue collar and has been regarded as the poorer part of the city; the south side is regarded as more white collar and affluent. However, there are large low-income neighborhoods on the south side as well and middle-class areas on the north side.

Downtown remains the financial, government, and office center for the region. City officials and downtown businesses have concentrated on renewing their property in the past few years. Storefronts have been painted and refurbished, and some specialty retail outlets—including a bookstore, gift shops, ice cream parlor, restaurants, and a large outdoor recreation store—exist downtown.

According to the La Crosse City Planning Department, 36 percent of all homes in La Crosse were built before 1939.<sup>1</sup> Of the city's 20,897 occupied housing units, most are "satisfactory," except for about 2 percent with such conditions as incomplete plumbing, lack of kitchen facilities, and overcrowding.<sup>2</sup> About half the housing units in the city are rental, half owner-occupied. The rental property serves permanent low-income residents as well as students at the three higher education institutions in the city (a branch of the University of Wisconsin, a small Catholic liberal arts university, and a state technical school).

Virtually all white until the mid- to late-1970s, by 1991 La Crosse had become home to Hmong refugees from Southeast Asia. The Hmong, from the mountains of Laos, had helped the CIA and the American and South Vietnamese armies fight the communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. Many were forced to leave Laos when the communists won. Eventually, many Hmong refugees settled in the United States.

The increase in the minority population has changed the face of La Crosse—particularly in the schools. According to Census figures, the number of people classified as "Asian or Pacific Islander" went from 153, or .32 percent in 1980 to 2,424, or 4.75 percent in 1990.<sup>3</sup> That number may represent a significant undercount of Hmong refugees. The latest 2000 Census figures show only 2,282 Hmong residents of La Crosse County, most in the city of La Crosse, but leaders of the La Crosse Hmong Mutual Assistance Association say their records show there are 3,491 Hmong residents in the county.<sup>4</sup> Thai Vue, executive associate director of the HMAA, said not all Hmong people filled out census forms, and some that did may have filled them out incorrectly or didn't understand English well enough.<sup>5</sup>

In La Crosse public schools, however, minorities show up in larger proportion. As of October 2000, there were 1,070 Asian students (13.9 percent), 84 Native Americans (1.1 percent), 255 black students (3.3 percent), and 73 Hispanic students (.95 percent). White students made up 80 percent of the total 7,605 students in the district.<sup>6</sup>

There have also been income imbalances in the school district, which can be seen by looking at the number of students whose family income qualifies them for free lunch, the measurement that the school district of La Crosse used to measure poverty. While the Census put 21 percent of city residents in poverty in 1989,<sup>7</sup> about 30 percent of all students qualified for a free lunch during the 1991–92 school year based on the federal poverty guidelines, set at 130 percent of the poverty line.<sup>8</sup>

Using that measurement, district leaders recognized some schools had a high concentration of low-income students, while others had practically none. This worried school staff members throughout the late 1980s. Richard Swantz, then-superintendent of the school district of La Crosse, said, “There was a lot of discussion at principals’ meetings for several years about the fact that we were seeing more and more poor children coming to school, and some of the special challenges that went along with that.”<sup>9</sup>

The two elementary schools with the highest percentages of students receiving free lunches in 1991–92 were Jefferson, on the lower north side, and Hamilton in the central part of the south side. Jefferson had 68.7 percent of all students receiving free lunch, while Hamilton had 63 percent.<sup>10</sup> State Road School, in an affluent suburban area, had only 4.8 percent. The next lowest poverty rate was at Summit School, located on an island in the Mississippi River, with 9.6 percent.

School staff members at high-poverty schools talked about these imbalances with Swantz: “They went out of their way to point out to me that this was something they were really getting concerned about.”<sup>11</sup>

## THE POLICY

It is impossible to discuss La Crosse’s experiment in socioeconomic balance—or how Superintendent Swantz dealt with issues of boundaries and income levels—without understanding a bit more history of the La Crosse school district. Swantz came to the district in 1977, during another time of turmoil following a school board recall.

That first recall occurred after the La Crosse Board of Education fired Myron McKee, a middle-school principal, for administrative issues including an incorrect count of milk money, missing science textbooks, and failure to chaperone a dance. The reality was, however, that the district had been sued after the principal had been accused of using undue force with students and violating student rights.<sup>12</sup>

After the seven-to-two vote to fire the principal, incumbent board members who supported the firing were recalled.<sup>13</sup> Swantz arrived in La Crosse to find himself in the difficult position of reporting to a board that had not hired him. That new board was, in fact, quite hostile to him, even holding no confidence votes, which he narrowly survived.<sup>14</sup>

Swantz also found when he came to La Crosse that the curricula at the city’s two high schools were very different. At Logan, the north

side high school, there was more of a trade-school curriculum; at Central, the south side high school, there were more college preparatory classes available. The two high schools even had different graduation requirements: "They were paying the same taxes, but had very different high schools. It was very striking," Swantz said.<sup>15</sup>

Just before Swantz arrived in La Crosse, a critical report was released from the North Central Association for Accreditation concerning Logan. That report actually had been sent to the district thirteen months previously, but had somehow remained unreleased.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, test scores at the two schools were also very different. At Logan, 11th grade students scored in the 49th percentile nationally, compared with Central, where students performed at the 65th percentile.<sup>17</sup> In 1981, district officials said the lower test scores of college-bound students were a result of past differences in curriculum and opportunity.<sup>18</sup> Still, around the time Swantz arrived in La Crosse, Logan was still in danger of losing its accreditation from the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.<sup>19</sup>

The La Crosse River marsh provided the boundary between the two high school attendance areas, and the schools were stereotyped as north side and south side schools. Even today, Central students refer to Logan students as "swampies," a reference to the fact that much of the north side was built on low-lying marshy ground.

Historically, the north side had been the home of more blue-collar workers, including railroad workers, and the large rail yard, "Grand Crossing," was located on the north side. This was one reason to have the high school serving that area to be more of a trade school. On the south side, where there were more white-collar workers and families, a college prep curriculum was expected.

A boundary change decision gave Swantz the opportunity to alter that. Enrollment had dropped in the elementary grades, and a new Logan High School was being built. In 1979, under Swantz's leadership, three elementary schools were closed, junior high schools (grades 7 to 9) were converted to middle schools (grades 6 to 8), the high schools were changed from three-year schools to four-year schools, and the high school boundaries were moved several blocks south.<sup>20</sup> The last change was the most controversial. All of a sudden south side students were expected to go to Logan. Some parents even moved so their children would not have to go to Logan.

The school board made all these decisions at one long meeting. After making decisions about all the other issues, it came time for a

vote on the high school boundaries. The vote was four to four when it came time for board member Kathryn Severance to vote. Her children would be directly affected by the decision—they would have to switch from Central to Logan if she voted yes. “I’ll never forget that meeting,” Swantz said. “It was four to four and it went to her and she voted to make the change. There was a hush. Many people didn’t believe that she would vote the way she did. It was a courageous call on her part.”<sup>21</sup>

As a newcomer to La Crosse, Swantz could not believe how strong the feelings were about the city’s two high schools:

I remember attending a meeting about this before the decision was made. The accusations that were made about Logan and the North Side and the young people who went to that school, and the staff members. It was incredible. Ugly stuff. It reflected the feelings people had about the so-called north side. To someone new in town like myself, I couldn’t believe it.<sup>22</sup>

After a few years, however, people became accustomed to the change. The curriculum was unified. College prep classes were available at both schools since both schools had children from wealthy families as well as middle-class and working-class students. Test scores moved closer together. It was not a question of Central students scoring lower, but Logan students scoring higher. Logan students scored in the 58th percentile nationally on the American College Test (ACT), while Central students scored in the 59th percentile.<sup>23</sup> By 1986, after the district had changed boundaries and adopted equalized education, the two high schools test scores had evened, and Logan had pulled ahead in some subject areas.<sup>24</sup>

La Crosse weathered that change well. Twenty years after the fact, Logan and Central are regarded as comparable schools. The only difference is that Central is larger, with approximately 1,400 students, and Logan has almost 1,000. While the same curriculum is offered at both schools today, there are challenges because of differences in size. Central is often able to offer more sections of a class than Logan because it has more students interested in taking that particular class. That makes for scheduling problems, because a course may be offered only once in a school day at Logan.

Although school planners expected elementary enrollment to stay low until about 1995, they did not take into account the influx of

Among families into the center of La Crosse. The elementary enrollment began to rise, but not at the fringes of the district, as planners expected, but right in the middle of town. By the late-1980s, school officials were seeing a need to build new elementary schools. In February 1989, the Citizens Long-Range Planning Committee was appointed to look at demographic data and make recommendations on the amount and kind of space needed before the year 2000. Among options were additions to existing schools, new schools, reopened schools, and boundary changes.

Long-Range Planning Committee members spent the next eight months considering the issue. Some committee members wanted to consider moving district administrators out of their offices in the former Hogan School, which had been one of the three elementary schools closed in 1980. Others argued that Hogan was too small and too antiquated to be used as a school again. Other options included adding on to a variety of district schools. By the time the committee finished its work, its recommendation for spending \$17.8 million on a combination of renovations and a new school raised concerns with critics who said it was a “Cadillac plan.”<sup>25</sup> The next day, Board members declared that the building plan was “up for grabs.”<sup>26</sup>

In the end, board members approved a plan to build two new schools—one each on the far north and south ends of the district—on land that cost \$270,000 for the north site and \$310,000 for the south site.<sup>27</sup> The cost became an issue.

As school board members began preparing for the construction of two new schools, administrators started thinking about the busing implications the new schools would create. Many more students would have to be bused as a result of the new construction. Administrators reasoned that as long as students would be on buses anyway, wouldn’t this be an opportunity to do something about the big poverty imbalances seen in La Crosse’s elementary schools? Swantz said,

Since we’re going to build two new schools and since some children are going to have to be moved, maybe we should at least be sensitive to this. At a principals’ meeting they started to ask, “could we do it?” “Was it possible to do it?” and right away there were people raising questions, that this could cause some turmoil. Then I had discussions with the school board about it, whether they would be interested in exploring the possibilities.<sup>28</sup>



Swantz found a rural district in Kentucky that was experimenting with some busing for racial integration. La Crosse administrators adapted that district's busing guidelines for La Crosse. In a July 1993 internal memo, Swantz wrote:

The issue was not race; nor was this busing the same as the busing to achieve racial integration. Until a decade ago, the district had few non-white students. Today the district's non-white population is about 15 percent, but only a third of the students receiving free lunch were non-white, mostly Southeast Asians. The black population is quite small and Hispanic students are nearly non-existent. Native Americans composed the second largest minority group.<sup>29</sup>

Looking back, Swantz said they believed that poverty, not race, was the real issue. In addition, the Southeast Asian refugees were new to the city and beginning to feel some effects of prejudice. School officials thought using race as a criteria would needlessly inflame the community. "It just made more sense to use poverty as the issue," Swantz said.<sup>30</sup>

Most people understand that no matter what color a youngster's skin is, if he comes from a family that is hurting economically, there are going to be some extra challenges. Years later, we're finding out that the research really supports that. We didn't want to push the race button any more than it was already being pushed.<sup>31</sup>

On May 21, 1991, school board members approved ten guidelines to use in changing elementary school boundaries, including: "Developing boundaries that have the greatest potential for stabilizing enrollments both in numbers of students and socio-economic composition," and, "When reassigning students to achieve a socio-economic balance, an attempt should be made to place them in the closest school," and, "Redistricting shall attempt to establish a socio-economic percentage of poverty students in each school that represents the district's average." Other guidelines related to special education students, minimizing transportation costs while fulfilling the guidelines, and reviewing the boundaries at least every five years.<sup>32</sup>

Woody Wiedenhoft, associate superintendent for business services, began trying different combinations of boundary changes, using

pecially designed computer software. The ideal was to have a 30 percent free lunch population in each school, but school officials realized it would be impossible to ever meet that target. Instead, they set a goal range of from 15 percent to 45 percent low-income students in each school.<sup>33</sup> According to Swantz:

Woody had this electronic pin map. All the children receiving free lunches would be on there. We knew where they lived. We tried different ways of assigning those children to see if we could meet the objectives of that proposal.<sup>34</sup>

Wiedenhoef tried a variety of approaches, but the one that worked the best in terms of the numbers was one that used several isolated attendance area “islands” to provide socioeconomic balance. For example, in a middle-class area on the south side of La Crosse, far from the Jefferson Elementary School attendance area, was an island of several blocks where students were assigned to attend Jefferson. This “Jefferson island” would later provide some of the key leaders of the recall movement.

Another island was far less controversial. It consisted of several blocks in a low-income neighborhood on the south side, whose students would be sent to State Road, the school in one of La Crosse’s most affluent areas, where only 4 percent of the population qualified for free lunch.

On October 15, 1991, the plan was presented to the school board and the public. A series of public meetings was scheduled for November 6, 14, and 16 at Central High School on the south side and Logan Middle School on the north side. At the October 15 board meeting, in which forty parents heard the presentation of the proposed boundary changes, Swantz urged parents to “look at this as adults,” words that clearly offended some people who would become recall advocates.

Under the proposed plan, 45 percent of the district’s 3,700 elementary school students would have to be bused to another school for the 1992–93 school year. However, an alternative plan, because of the geographical nature of the district, would have had an even higher percentage of students bused.<sup>35</sup>

Swantz predicted that the students would adjust better than the parents did: “If you’re really upset about this,” Swantz told parents, “I think you ought to be calling me, rather than saying to your children how terrible this is because they very well might be going to a new school. Kids can adjust a lot better than we can.”<sup>36</sup>

Most parents who attended the first two meetings were critical of the plan, as were the mayor of La Crosse and the Chamber of Commerce. By the third meeting, more parents who favored the plan were in attendance and spoke for it. But things were deceptively quiet. At one point, Wiedenhoef said of La Crosse residents, "They seem to be taking it very well."<sup>37</sup>

## THE POLITICS

After months of deliberations and three public hearings, on January 7 La Crosse School Board members voted, 8-1, to approve a plan to achieve socioeconomic balance in its eleven elementary schools through boundary changes and busing. On January 22, a group called the Recall Alliance announced that it would soon begin collecting signatures for a recall of school board members who supported the busing plan. Organizers included a bank vice president and a developer—both of whom had children who would be bused to another school—plus a lawyer and an eye surgeon.

In addition to the busing plan, the new Recall Alliance announced its intention to fire Superintendent Swantz and his top two deputies, Assistant Superintendent David Johnston and Business Manager Wiedenhoef. Also targeted were six of the nine school board members—they were the board members not up for re-election in April 1992. Under Wisconsin law, public officials cannot be subject to a recall election until after they have served in office for a year. Since the recall would not be held until summer, none of the board members elected in April could be recalled. Instead, recall advocates directed their efforts at board members Audrey Kader, Robert Kuechmann, Roger Winter, Kenneth French, Roger LeGrand and John Parkyn. All but Kader had voted for the busing plan.

Wisconsin's law is permissive on recall elections, compared with other states. It allows the recall of an elected official for any reason "related to the official responsibilities" of the official involved. A pamphlet is available from the Wisconsin State Elections Board, telling citizens how to begin a recall election.<sup>38</sup>

One day after the Recall Alliance made its first public statements, another group announced its existence—the Coalition for Children, headed by La Crosse lawyer Jim Birnbaum. Announcing the new group so soon after the recall was announced was not an accident. Birnbaum had called Swantz weeks earlier to offer whatever help he could to the school administration and board. When it appeared that reaction to

the busing plan was going to become an ongoing problem, Swantz called Birnbaum and accepted his offer to help.<sup>39</sup>

Birnbaum was a product of Catholic schools in La Crosse, but had been active in civil rights issues in the past, including participating in civil rights demonstrations in Milwaukee with Father James Groppi, a civil rights leader in that city during the 1960s.<sup>40</sup> Birnbaum was an early supporter of the school busing plan and testified in support of it at a public hearing on November 4. His argument for the plan was steeped in the language of the civil rights struggle and in the history of La Crosse:

I am keenly aware of the long-standing traditional attitudes that have existed in this community from the time I was a youngster. When I was in school here, there was a decided polarity based upon school district boundaries. The North Siders did not associate with the South Siders. Public school students shunned Catholic school students. Intra-city athletic events were not simply healthy competitions between fellow citizens, but emotional blood baths that mirrored the Civil War and the Crusades. Those attitudes of elitism, clannishness, and at time rank snobbery are not something of which this community can be proud. In fact, those attitudes were highly destructive, formulating attitudes, which all too often influenced how we treated each other long after. . . .

The School Board of La Crosse is now facing a decision about whether or not in the future it is going to follow the destructive and failed patterns of behavior of our major U.S. cities, which results ultimately in crisis, polarization and substantial social problems. The board has a choice of addressing that issue up front and doing something courageous, innovative and which will necessarily have the effect of avoiding problems that bigger cities faced with increasing minority populations. You have a chance to be different than Milwaukee, Chicago, and St. Louis. Don't miss that opportunity.<sup>41</sup>

Birnbaum had listened to some of the rhetoric of those who opposed the busing plan and found it to be "elitist, veiled racism in my view."<sup>42</sup>

Also at this time, Hmong representatives and other minorities, along with supporters, were active in a group called the Community Attitudes Task Force. Members of that group issued a statement in support of the socioeconomic balance plan. That statement talked about the importance

of education and the need for diversity in each school's population. It spoke of the importance of diversity to students in all income groups:

The value of diversity does not flow only to the disadvantaged student. It is an educational necessity for all of our children. Perhaps the most important lesson we can now teach our children for life in the 21st century is how to live in a world of diversity. Children who are taught they are better than someone else because of where they live, how they dress, their wealth or social standing, or that they are entitled to special privileges, or that they are not required to share in the sacrifices of the world, are destined for disappointment, disillusionment and ultimately failure in a world that has become increasingly intolerant of those 19th century myths.<sup>43</sup>

One of the arguments that busing opponents made against the plan was that it would damage La Crosse's neighborhoods. The task force had an answer for that concern:

There are those who say they are for diversity but that the price of busing is too high. We understand that argument but strongly disagree. Busing is required to fill our new schools. Therefore, it will require no greater expenditure of time, resources or inconvenience to address the current problems of social, cultural, and racial segregation in our schools.

La Crosse is a small city. From a metropolitan perspective, there is no school in La Crosse that is not a "neighborhood school." The equivalent of a bus ride to the mall hardly presents the devastating social tragedy argued here.<sup>44</sup>

The two opposing groups—the Recall Alliance and the Coalition for Children—began their campaigns. Recall Alliance members had to begin the process of getting thousands of signatures. State law required them to get a proportion of the total votes in the school district of La Crosse in the last election for governor. Coalition members monitored the actions of the Recall Alliance and issued periodic statements about the issues. They would later become involved in the process of examining and challenging the signatures on petitions. They also filed suit in court to block the recall election itself. But in the beginning, the Coalition held meetings and organized citizens to fight the recall. Birnbaum announced that the Coalition would "serve as a truth squad to correct reports that aren't true."<sup>45</sup>

Recall leaders broadened their support to include several prominent people who had been long-time critics of the school district. The reasons for recall began to include arguments that the district spent too much, that Swantz and his top officials dominated the board, and that Swantz was paid too much.

Board member Roger LeGrand noted the involvement of the long-time critics in an opinion piece he wrote for the *La Crosse Tribune*. Before being elected to the school board, LeGrand served as a La Crosse City Council member. Council membership at that time included serving on something called the Fiscal Control Board, made up of council members and representatives from the surrounding towns. It had final veto power over the school district's budget. (State school finance laws were changed in the 1980s to allow urban districts to exercise complete control over their own budgets.) "The recall movement threatens all we have accomplished," LeGrand wrote:

It is a curious alliance of veteran anti-education activists and people who are angry about the boundary decision. I served on the Fiscal Control Board in the late '70s and early '80s with recall leaders Paul Schneider and John Schubert. They voted against every education proposal put forward by the school boards of those days. They even voted for a cut, which would have resulted in the elimination of all co-curricular activities, including athletics. They are veteran nay-sayers, no friends of education.<sup>46</sup>

Recall Alliance leaders were biding their time, waiting for the day that they could begin circulating petitions for signatures. They hired a veteran Republican campaign consultant, Sue Lynch. In 1984, Lynch had run the State Senate campaign of Brian Rude, a one-term state representative who defeated Democratic Representative John Medinger in a special election for State Senate. Medinger would later play a key role in a La Crosse School Board race, supporting the Coalition for Children in fighting the recall.

Lynch began organizing volunteers by City Council district. She noted immediately that the recall had three distinct advantages: Recall Alliance leaders had the personal wealth needed to carry out an effective campaign, plenty of motivated volunteers, and widespread public support.<sup>47</sup>

While Lynch was organizing volunteers, recall leaders were appealing to the school board not to renew Swantz's contract, which was due to expire. Despite the arguments of the recall leaders, board

members voted to renew the superintendent's contract for three years and included a stipulation that Swantz would be paid the amount of his contract even if it were terminated early. That action prevented any future board from firing Swantz in the next three years without paying him the full amount of his contract, a \$250,000 golden parachute. In effect, it made the threat to fire administrators a hollow one. Recall leaders were furious.

In response to the concerns being raised about school funding, Coalition for Children leaders made a public appeal to the Recall Alliance. The coalition wanted both groups to work together on a joint committee to study the school district finances. Recall leaders rejected the offer. They said they wanted to wait until the regular April school board election and a recall election, which could not be held until at least June. Alliance members proposed a candidate forum to be sponsored by both groups in February, and the coalition members decided to have their own study of school finances.

Seven challengers and two incumbents, Dr. Charles Miller III and Ellen Rosborough, were running for the three open seats on the school board. One other incumbent, Marianne Loeffler, did not run for re-election. All three had supported the socioeconomic balance plan.

Miller and Rosborough survived the primary election, but were defeated in the general election in April. The new board members were Anna Sundet, Neil Duresky, and Michael McArdle. With the general election over, and two pro-busing incumbents removed from the board, Recall Alliance members set their sights on the six remaining board members. They had begun their petition drive even before the April election. Under state law, they needed approximately 7,500 signatures on petitions to recall all six board members.

Coalition for Children members vowed to check every petition to verify that the names were legitimate. At that point, the coalition's actions became more legalistic; their goal was to monitor the process of gathering signatures and to go to court to try and stop the recall election. This process so dominated the coalition's efforts that there was little time spent on actually campaigning on the merits of the issues. Board member LeGrand later regretted that the campaign was so geared toward legal actions and not political ones. He said there was not even a candidate forum for candidates running in the recall election.<sup>48</sup>

On a cold and overcast Friday in April, Recall Alliance member Mary McGuire pulled a red wagon piled high with recall petitions down the hall of the Hogan Administration Center. Outside the old school,

Birnbaum was holding a press conference, telling reporters that he had already filed a request to examine the petitions. Recall Alliance member Paul Schneider came up. Putting his face just inches from Birnbaum's, Schneider waved a finger at him and then jabbed him in the chest with it. Birnbaum, remembering his training as a civil rights activist, put his hands in his pockets so there would be no question about whether he laid a hand on Schneider.<sup>49</sup> "You are just pulling a political ploy," Schneider shouted. "People like you are making a living on the school system. You have padded your pockets from the school system for years."<sup>50</sup>

Birnbaum challenged him to prove his charge that he was making money off the school district. While Schneider confronted Birnbaum, the television cameras recorded the whole thing. It was broadcast on the six o'clock news that evening. Birnbaum, who was not being paid by the school district for anything, later sued Schneider, forcing him to pay \$1,000, which Birnbaum contributed to the Coalition for Children.

A total of 10,300 names on petitions were filed by the Recall Alliance. Thirty-nine Coalition for Children members would spend the next few weeks examining each one. Although irregularities were found, including people who had signed the names of boxers Mike Tyson and Sugar Ray Leonard, there were not enough invalid signatures to make a difference.<sup>51</sup>

Two incumbents, Roger Winter and Robert Kuechmann, filed suit to try to stop the recall election, but that effort was not successful. A local trial court actually ruled that the election was illegal, but the Wisconsin Court of Appeals overruled it and ordered the election to be held.

Six candidates were running—one each against all six incumbents. But one challenger dropped out before the election, leaving Roger Winter without an opponent. On July 14, four incumbents—LeGrand, Kuechmann, John Parkyn, and Kenneth French—were defeated. They were replaced by Gary Harter, Lynetta Kopp, Dan Lange, and Douglas Farmer. Audrey Kader, the only incumbent to have voted against the busing plan, kept her seat. (Incidentally, Kuechmann was in the unenviable position of being the only public official in Wisconsin to have been recalled and removed from office twice. He also had been recalled in 1977 after voting to fire Principal Myron McKee, only to be later elected to the board again.)

Once the new board members got into office, they found their options limited. They couldn't fire Swantz, because the previous board had renewed his contract. And, they couldn't really overturn the busing plan because school was about to start, and parents at that point didn't want more changes in their lives. So, the new board simply added a



choice provision to the plan. Any parent who didn't want to send a child to a different school for socioeconomic balance could opt out. Less than two hundred children changed schools under the parental choice option during that first year. All but two schools met the socioeconomic target during the 1992–93 school year.<sup>52</sup>

With its candidates elected to the board, the Recall Alliance suddenly disappeared in terms of influence and activity. With so much passion and energy put into the recall, the intensity dropped after the election.<sup>53</sup> The Coalition for Children, however, continued to meet as a group and attend every school board meeting, regularly offering criticism and comment.

Just nine months after the recall election, on April 6, 1993, recall board members Douglas Farmer, Gary Harter, and Dan Lange lost their seats on the board. In their place, Sue Mormann, Fred Kusch, and Thai Vue were elected. All were supporters of the socioeconomic balance plan, and Mormann and Kusch were active members of the Coalition for Children. Thai Vue was the first Hmong elected to office in La Crosse.

Why was there such a turnabout? Mary Stanek was one of two Coalition for Children members who regularly attended Board of Education meetings during the immediate post-recall aftermath. She and Margaret Jansen regularly spoke out, criticizing the new board members. Stanek, who went on to serve on the Board of Education, said she felt the public and media were ready to get beyond the turmoil.<sup>54</sup> Parents, she said, had already discovered their children's new schools were positive places in great part because of the staff and administration:

People got to experience it, that it wasn't awful. Moving to different schools wasn't awful. Leaving your neighborhood school wasn't awful. The kids benefited from it. People backed off. The staff at all the different schools made sure that it worked.<sup>55</sup>

One of the most interesting things about La Crosse's experience was how little the national media noticed that only a few months after the recall election, residents threw out three recall candidates in regular elections in April of 1993. There were several reasons for the residents' change of heart. The recall effort was a loose coalition of people who opposed the boundary changes, disliked the superintendent, and believed the school district was spending too much. This last group made up the

majority of rank-and-file recall supporters. They included many older people who believed that once they replaced most of the school board members the school district would spend less money.<sup>56</sup>

As soon as the recall election was over, the big recall alliance fell apart. Its members stopped going to school board meetings, and the fever pitch of political activity stopped. But the other side, including members of the Coalition for Children, other parents, and the district teachers union, continued to attend meetings. In fact, the teachers union suggested that it would be a good idea to televise board meetings so that members of the public could see how the new members conducted themselves. Teachers even volunteered to run the cameras, which they did for the next year.<sup>57</sup>

Swantz said the new board members were perceived by the public as being arrogant and argumentative. “To some extent, some of the behavior of the board worked against them,” Swantz said. “That’s one of the reasons why they were so quickly turned out of office. People did watch the board and did not like what they saw.”<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, the busing plan proceeded without an issue. Most parents and students adjusted to their new schools. Neil Duresky, one of the three candidates elected to the board in the regular election that preceded the recall, said he did not support the notion of socioeconomic balance in the schools but later came to see that it had educational merit.<sup>59</sup>

Swantz remained as superintendent, with all of his assistants. La Crosse retained its busing plan for socioeconomic balance—the first one in the nation—albeit one that would become watered down over time by the demographic changes and opportunity for parents to opt their children out through a choice program.

## THE AFTERMATH

La Crosse’s experiment with socioeconomic balance in its elementary schools became a topic of national attention. News stories about it appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, and other publications. Television news crews also reported extensively on La Crosse’s experience—particularly the controversy and the recall election.

Once the recall election was held in July 1992, the national media disappeared. The story had ended, apparently, with the rejection of the program and the removal from office of those school board members

who supported it. That message turned out not to be true, even if the real results went unreported. What really happened was that nine months after the recall, three of the recall candidates were removed from office at the next regular election. They were replaced with two leaders of the Coalition for Children and the first Hmong man ever elected to public office in La Crosse. This speaks volumes about the opinion of La Crosse voters.

National media reports also failed to say that although the recall candidates and sympathizers elected to the La Crosse School Board instituted a choice plan that allowed parents to opt out of the socio-economic busing plan, few parents actually did. Nor was there a mass exodus to private (mostly Catholic) schools. Instead, parents sent their children to the new schools to which they were assigned and over time became comfortable with those schools. In later public opinion surveys done by the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse Political Science Department, under contract with the school district, residents in La Crosse expressed support both for socioeconomic balance and for neighborhood schools.

Even in 1994, just two years after the recall election, 60 percent of La Crosse school district residents surveyed said they favored “the idea of attempting socio-economic balance in the schools,” and 29 percent said they opposed it.<sup>60</sup> In a follow-up survey in April 2001, 64 percent said they favored socioeconomic balance, while only 21 percent said they were opposed. Support for socioeconomic balance was expressed by all income and ethnic groups and all educational levels, but was particularly strong among younger residents and racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>61</sup>

Why was this plan so important? Swantz said he consistently heard from teachers about how difficult it was to teach children in schools where most of the students came from low-income families:

Teachers were saying that when they get these very high percentages of children from poor families—and poverty was the issue with teachers—large numbers of these kids created special problems for the teacher. Teachers spent far less time teaching reading and math and science. A lot of their time was spent taking care of issues that these children brought to school—lack of resources, violence at home, coming to school without a coat on. Teachers became social workers. I remember getting phone calls from landlords asking for teachers to back off about concerns about housing conditions, for example.<sup>62</sup>

As a result of the socioeconomic balance plan, which remains in effect today (attendance boundaries have not been changed since the beginning of the 1992–93 school year), the percentage of low-income children in La Crosse's elementary schools in 2001 ranges from a low of 17 percent in Roosevelt School (located in a middle-class neighborhood on the north side) to a high of 62 percent at Hamilton School, still the school in a very poor neighborhood in La Crosse with the most low-income students. Jefferson's low-income population was 48 percent and Franklin Elementary, another school in a low-income neighborhood, at 36 percent.<sup>63</sup> A year after the plan went into effect, Hamilton had 63 percent low-income students, Jefferson had 44.8 percent, and Franklin had 46 percent.<sup>64</sup>

School officials had a difficult time reducing the number of low-income students at Hamilton because it was a small and densely populated district, and there were no attendance islands of middle-class students as the district had created for Jefferson. In addition, when the district approved its busing plan and guidelines for who should and should not be bused, students who lived immediately adjacent to any school were not bused. In the case of Hamilton, the attendance area was so small that exemption added to the difficulties of integrating the school with middle-income students.<sup>65</sup>

Did the socioeconomic balance improve learning? Teachers and school officials believe that it did, but there are no numbers to answer the question definitively. The school district of La Crosse never did the kind of longitudinal study with a control group that would have given a scientific basis for saying how children did under the changes. Given the turmoil caused by the recall election and the high turnover of school board members in a short period, no one would have been willing to spend the money and resources needed to do such a study.

Comparing test scores by school from year to year does not yield statistically valid information because the samples of students are so small (thirty to forty fourth graders at a school, for example) and because different tests were used in different years.<sup>66</sup> La Crosse school officials do see gaps in performance between low-income students and students with more economic resources. Those performance gaps mirror what is going on at the national level, with students who qualify for free and reduced lunch scoring at the just under 60 percent of the national average, compared with all levels of students at about 83 percent. The gap worsens as students get older.<sup>67</sup>

While it is not possible to draw neat lines of cause and effect, it can be said that achievement in La Crosse is at a fairly high level considering

the economic status of many of its students. La Crosse has a relatively high poverty rate, with only Milwaukee County and two Native American reservations higher, according to former La Crosse superintendent Swantz. Yet, the district's achievement levels are at 83 percent of the national average.

In terms of public support for the schools, it is interesting to note that when some school board members were considering the possibility in 1999 of closing Jefferson School, some of the strongest supporters for keeping it open were in the attendance island created in 1991—the area that also produced some of the leaders of the recall movement.

In 1992, La Crosse was, indeed, in the forefront of a movement to look at the impact of socioeconomic balance in the schools and to create schools in which the majority of students were middle class, with middle-class education values. Parents, however, were allowed to use school choice to opt out of the program, making socioeconomic balance potentially more difficult to achieve. Demographic changes over the years have allowed some schools to slip back to high percentages of low-income students, and Hamilton School's small and dense attendance area made that school's income makeup particularly difficult to change. But the opinion survey results show continued support for socioeconomic balance, even as parents say they also favor neighborhood schools.

Even at Hamilton School there are differences in opinions about whether socioeconomic balance or neighborhood schools are the key to improving school performance. Gerianne Wettstein, a kindergarten teacher, said the faculty is split on the issue.<sup>68</sup> All teachers do agree that poverty has a serious impact on the learning of students. As a kindergarten teacher, Wettstein said the differences in experiences are the most striking between the haves and the have-nots. It's not just an issue of teaching skills, something they do well at Hamilton, but at connecting what the student learn to their lives and having the background to understand what they are taught. As an example, she said, "Someone can ask me if I know Einstein's theory of relativity. I can recite  $E = MC^2$ . But if you ask me what it means, I have no idea."<sup>69</sup>

It is interesting to note that when the La Crosse school district considered moving some children back to Hamilton from the wealthiest elementary school in the district, their parents objected. It was true that their children were rarely invited to birthday parties at State Road School, but they felt their youngsters were exposed to the experiences and dreams of their more affluent classmates. Rather than being jealous

of what the wealthier students had, these students, who were primarily Hmong, sought to have what the others had. They dreamed of becoming lawyers and doctors, of having a home and vehicles of their own. “It’s a ray of possibility and hope,” Wettstein said.<sup>70</sup>

At the time of this writing, the School District of La Crosse is involved in two major efforts that touch on many of the same issues related to student performance. This year the district is creating what it calls a Vision for an Exemplary District. That process, which also is designed to include parents, teachers, administrators, and other staff and community members, further defines four directions that the district already has identified.<sup>71</sup>

- u Expand learning opportunities for all students.
- u Ensure quality staff and dynamic environment that foster continuous learning.
- u Provide facilities and services that enhance learning.
- u Provide district processes and procedures that allow for vision and change.

Even more directly related is a new discussion of how to best manage district facility needs. A task force of parents, community members, teachers, administrators, and other district staff were appointed by Superintendent Thomas C. Downs in 2001 to look at facility management at all school levels—elementary, middle, and high school.<sup>72</sup>

Jim Coles of Tregoe Educational Forum, Inc., and administrator of the Cooperative Educational Services Agency 7, is consultant for the task force. Over the summer, he gave the twenty-seven members “homework”—assignments that asked them to define terms that are as common today as they were in 1992: socioeconomic balance, diversity, and neighborhood schools.<sup>73</sup> “I know the board will ask what you mean by socioeconomic balance and diversity. I know the superintendent will ask you what you mean by them and why they are important issues,” Coles said.<sup>74</sup>

The task force is working methodically in a step-by-step process designed to gain consensus in whatever recommendations it makes. The district will be “a whole lot better off spending time on the front end,” according to Coles.<sup>75</sup>

The facilities management recommendation is slated to be implemented by the Board of Education in the fall of 2003.

Brent Larson, a Central High School social studies teacher and a task force member, may have assessed the current process best:

We need to be deliberate and consciously slow in what we do because what we do will affect the district for a long time. We have a long history in La Crosse. We have been down this path before. We need to learn from what we did before and involve the parents in these decisions.<sup>76</sup>

In a State of the District speech at the start of the 2001–02 school year, Superintendent Downs spoke of the successes of the district, but cautioned that there are continuing challenges, particularly in the achievement gap of economically disadvantaged or English for Speakers of Other Languages students:

I am encouraged that we have passionate teachers, passionate principals and curriculum supervisors who continue to not hide behind the demographics of our community. They will continue to report that we have more work to be done and hopefully more success to be achieved. These issues deserve our diligence and our attention.<sup>77</sup>

Downs, who knows well the history of the district, advocates a philosophy of continual improvement with a commitment to better communications with all elements of the community:

The enemy of the best is the good. We can all sit back and say we are a good district. I hear a lot of people say that all the time, but that is the enemy. We have to continue to seek out ways to be an exemplary school district. Never define yourself by what you've been. Define yourself by what you'll become.<sup>78</sup>

Downs said he believes La Crosse residents value socioeconomic balance in the schools. He also believes that most parents have a more expanded definition of a “neighborhood school”:<sup>79</sup>

When I came to town four years ago, we were taking a look at that point at the need for neighborhood schools and more school choice.

What I was more focused on was hearing the community say it wanted neighborhood schools. I thought the socio-economic plan was going to be scuttled. Subsequently, I have learned that for most parents the definition of a neighborhood school is where their kids are going to school now. In reality, what's happened is that the definition of neighborhood schools has expanded to reflect the socio-economic busing plan that was adopted 10 years ago.<sup>80</sup>

Downs regards the socioeconomic plan as a success for all but two elementary schools, Hamilton and Jefferson. For those two schools, where low-income students continue to be the solid majority, more work needs to be done. It could include new forms of choice—magnet programs at the schools most in need of change—or it could include new busing plans or attendance islands.<sup>81</sup>

We've got to do what we need to do to support socio-economic balance. It raises the achievement of the lower-income kids and doesn't in any way hurt the achievement of the more advantaged kids. I believe it's a higher value personally for me now.<sup>82</sup>



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