

## [The Upcoming School Board Election and Union Endorsements--How Close is Too Close? - Ahmed Ismail](#)

Next week's School Board election will be an interesting one. Board President John Steininger and Board Trustee Fred Minturn have decided to not seek re-election. This leaves two four year terms open for three candidates--Dan Roeske, Lois Valente and Diane Karabetsos.

Dozens of readers of this blog have called to ask my advice on who to vote for in next week's election. I'd like to share my thoughts and research with you on this issue, especially in light of a letter which the MEA (the State teachers union organization) sent out on behalf of the GPEA (the Grosse Pointe teachers union).

First, I don't know Mr. Roeske. Mrs. Valente was kind enough to get together with me a few months ago to discuss our schools, as did Mrs. Karabetsos. Both women seem to be honest and sincere people, wanting to do what is best for our kids, as I am sure Mr. Roeske does. All three seem to be intelligent people.

Other than that, I don't know much more about the candidates than we all have read online and in the local newspapers (which hasn't been much of any substance). The media has artfully danced around the toughest question that faces our school system and these new Board members, namely what are each of the candidates going to do to deal with rising costs and declining income (other than pray for grant money or the GP Foundation raising money)?

Since 85% of our budget goes to salaries, the discussion on rising costs and declining income has to lead to our labor contracts. We have spent down our fund equity (our savings account for rainy days) from close to \$20 million down to under \$10 million in the span of only three years. Our bond rating with Moody's is sure to be adjusted downward as a result, and hence the interest rate we pay when we borrow is sure to increase. Under our labor contracts (which all expire in 1-1/2 years), the staff in the 2012-13 school year will be taking pay cuts to equal 85% of any shortfall below the a \$10 million fund equity (10% of our gross revenues). We are below this 10% threshold now, and many of the School Board members don't seem to be too concerned about letting it drop further.

According to some senior school system administrators, this pay reduction for 2012-13 will be somewhere in the neighborhood of 5%-8% of EVERY staff member's paycheck. With pay cuts to continue under the contracts on the one side and Governor Snyder in Lansing pushing from the other side to control public employee health care and retirement costs and institute merit pay instead of seniority pay, the Grosse Pointe Education Association (GPEA) and the Michigan Education Association (MEA) don't need a crystal ball to see that they need all the friends they can get, both locally and in Lansing.

Enter the political endorsement process. Being a "public education junkie", I have been following school board elections all across the nation. For some interesting reading on what's going on, click [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) to read three of these articles. Another great article on the subject appeared in [Education Report](#).

The bottom line is that the education-related unions are getting organized and using their clout to support candidates (both with manpower and funding) who they feel might be friendly to their challenges in upcoming contract negotiations, which are sure to be contentious at best. For a year old list of just some of the school board election donations the Michigan union PACs have made, [click here](#). Unfortunately, we won't know if any Grosse Pointe candidates will be added to this monetary donation list until after next week's election.

Our local GPEA has endorsed school board candidates in some of the past few years. A retired teacher brought in the [letter from the GPEA](#) to its members to show me this past Saturday. The letter is urging all GPEA members to support Dan Roeske and Lois Valente for our school board. [Please take the time to read this](#)

[letter](#). The envelope it came in had the return address of the MEA in Clinton Township on it, so now we know that the State offices of the teachers' union are very interested in what happens in the Grosse Pointe's school board election.

The question that came to my mind when I read the GPEA letter was whether or not accepting the endorsement of the staff unions will unknowingly put Mr. Roeske and Mrs. Valente in a conflict of interest should they be elected when it comes to voting on any labor contracts. Will Mr. Roeske and Mrs. Valente have to recuse themselves from any votes on these contracts?

The jury is out on this question. Our School Board policies address conflict of interests, but only in the broadest of terms. The way I see it, there are two kinds of conflicts of interest in play here--a legal one and an ethical one. Based on what I have been able to find in my research, there is no legal conflict of interest created for Mr. Roeske or Mrs. Valente by accepting a general endorsement in their election efforts. The gray area in the law (and in our Board policy) starts when any kind of monetary aid (in the form of in-kind or real donations) occurs. A number of experts around the country do believe that accepting an endorsement from a staff member groups on which a prospective Board member will vote on labor contracts is surely an ethical one, especially when either in-kind (manpower) or actual cash donations are involved.

Mike Reno, a friend and former Rochester School Board trustee covered the topic in a very easy to understand [Op-Ed piece in the Detroit News](#). Mike has had first hand experience dealing with the power of the union machine in Rochester, where some Board members received thousands of dollars in support from teacher-related unions for their election campaigns. He has the same ethical concerns that I have regarding a Board member voting on the pay and benefits of someone from whom he has accepted a donation. It just doesn't pass the "smell" test for either one of us.

The bottom line for us as a community is what level of ethical integrity do we want from our School Board members? Accepting an endorsement and its accompanying manpower and/or funding carries an unwritten obligation for a possible quid pro quo at some time in the future. Our candidates have to stay above reproach on this issue. We can't put ourselves in the position of having elected officials whose elections have been funded and manpowered by the very people on whose salaries and benefits they will be voting.

Take the time to absorb the [letter from the GPEA](#) and what they feel each candidate stands for and why they are endorsing them. It will be very hard for Mrs. Karabetsos to compete against the union machine that has kicked in to get Mr. Roeske and Mrs. Valente elected. The only hope she has is to make her case clear that she does not believe it is ethical for a school board member to take any monies from a political PAC group like the MEA or the GPEA and to pledge to NEVER take funds from any labor group with which the school does business, and that the voters listen and agree.

Will Grosse Pointe voters realize the danger of electing the union slate in next week's school board election? With only three candidates running for two seats, one of the union's candidates is a shoe-in. We'll know in just five days if our unions are successful in getting both of their candidates on our school board. I hope you'll play it safe for our kids and our community and cast one of your votes for Diane Karabetsos, for whom there is no potential union endorsement conflict of interest. If you know the other two candidates, for the community's sake, please encourage them to stay above reproach by refusing any manpower or monetary donations from any of our labor unions or their related PACs, as there is nothing I would like more than for them to prove my conflict of interest concerns to be unfounded.

Best wishes,

