

October 2004

A Decade of Advocacy for Whitefish Bay Schools

State Leaders Listen When AFE Speaks Out

The sidewalk outside the kindergarten door at Cumberland Elementary School is often crowded with parents, dropping off their four- and five-year-olds and standing to chat as younger children run through the grass or lounge in strollers.

This was the scene in 1993, when Anne Rothacker and David Scrivner were kindergartners. Their mothers, Connie Gavin and Meredie Scrivner, were among the parents getting to know each other at the door. They talked about picture books and sleep schedules and the new routines of school.

But Gavin remembers the thoughtful group gathered at the door that year had weightier issues on their minds as well:

“Our discussions were often about public education policy. This is when Gov. Thompson proposed, and the legislature enacted, two-thirds funding of the schools by the state to reduce property taxes. Several of us were aware of this, and how similar plans had played out in other states

and the loss of local control that followed. We talked about the fact that there was a vacuum for advocating in support of public education.”

Meredie Scrivner came up with the idea for a parent group called “Advocates for Education.” But a year passed before a troubling issue turned the idea into a movement. A referendum to approve upgrades to the middle school failed, and parents could not believe it.

*10 years ago...
“there was a
vacuum for
advocating in
support of public
education.”*

*-Connie Gavin, Whitefish
Bay parent*

school supporters were both dumbstruck and annoyed at ourselves that we had let the defeat happen. We realized we should have mounted a positive campaign and that complacency had cost the community dearly.”

Parent Linda Olsheska remembers that middle school science students at the time were using coffee cans as sinks. She believed the physical

school environment was essential in the critical middle school years. Olsheska’s daughters were in 3rd grade and senior kindergarten at the time, and she was looking to the future. Five parents met in Olsheska’s living room on a hot August evening to revive the middle school improvement issue.

The result was a grassroots effort to get the hundreds of signatures needed to encourage the school board to put the measure back on the ballot the following spring. The new kernel of volunteers gathered friends and went door to door over a Labor Day weekend, secured the signatures and began the process that returned the issue to referendum.

The Vote Yes campaign came next in the spring of 1995, employing 700 volunteers who worked persuading friends, neighbors and strangers that the quality of Whitefish Bay’s education was at stake. They hosted coffees, canvassed neighborhoods, passed out flyers, even dressed in animal costumes on Silver Spring, anything to draw attention to the middle school issue.

Meredie Scrivner says, “The way the community came together in support puts a lump in my throat to this day. The second vote, held in the spring of 1995, had a 69% voter turnout, which we believe was a state record for a spring election. Our calculations at the beginning of the campaign were that 3000 yes votes would be needed for victory. The ref-

Hundreds Mobilize for Middle School Referendum

Scrivner recalls, “When the middle school referendum was defeated, parents and

erendum passed by a margin of 80 votes, with 2992 people voting yes. Advocacy had worked.”

Incorporation, Structure and Tackling New Issues

Following that great success, Advocates for Education created an organizational structure, wrote and adopted formal articles of incorporation and bylaws, and elected their first board. They trademarked the name. Members hammered out policy statements, the basis for AFE’s advocacy, which are now posted on the group’s website.

Two big issues in Madison during those years were school funding and the standards and assessment movement, including the “no social promotion law” and the high school graduation test. AFE members pledged to become experts on these issues. They formed study groups to research and recommend advocacy. AFE began earning its reputation in Madison for being well informed.

Connie Gavin was deeply involved in the testing issue. “It made no sense to us that major decisions in the life of a child be based on one test. We worked to preserve the parent opt-out from these tests, when the governor proposed removing it. At the end of the day, the tests in 4th and 8th grades were only one factor in the promotion decision, the parent opt-out remained law, and the graduation test was not funded.”

Parents’ Voices Respected in Madison

From the testing campaign, AFE members learned that parents are an important voice in educational policy. They found that parents have special credibility with policy makers because they are not politicized or part of the educational establishment.

State School Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster says, “I com-

mend Advocates for Education of Whitefish Bay for supporting authentic assessments and rigorous curriculum rather than an overemphasis on standardized testing.”

Whitefish Bay’s state representatives are supporters

Whitefish Bay’s representatives in Madison also admire the work of AFE.

State Senator Alberta Darling says, “AFE should be particularly proud of its effectiveness in the State Capitol. I know of no other grassroots educational organization that has played such a critical role in the development of statewide educational policy. Whether it’s school funding, academic standards or testing, AFE has been able to break traditional boundaries in order to make change. Leaders from across the state, in both parties and in different branches of government, all know to listen when AFE talks – a tremendous accomplishment.”

State Representative Sheldon Wasserman frequently attends AFE events. “I was first elected to office when Advocates for Education was just getting started. I remember thinking back then that the organization was poised to make a major impact at the local and state levels of government, and I was right. AFE members are a wonderful, smart, dedicated group of people who truly have made a difference. Through unique leadership and effective grassroots organizing, education in Whitefish Bay and the landscape of the local school board have been directly influenced. And North Shore residents as well as state officials look to AFE for non-partisan information on a wide range of education issues. This is a distinction that only a select few groups can claim.”

Careful, Thoughtful, Strong

As Linda Olsheska says, “Everyone is

so busy, and the news media doesn’t cover smaller local issues. AFE gives parents the opportunity to learn and take action, and that’s really what they need.”

In recent years, AFE has addressed class rank, foreign language in the elementary schools, homework, writing and math instruction. The group organizes well-attended forums and writes newsletter articles on issues of local concern, always providing feedback to the school district.

Whitefish Bay School Superintendent James Rickabaugh has high regard for AFE. “It’s independent advocacy for education; careful, thoughtful people looking at education issues from the perspective of parents. Most organizations of this nature come and go, and AFE’s longevity is a testament to its leadership. I’m not aware of any other organization with this strong impact and level of commitment anywhere else in the state.”

The Next Decade

Perhaps the most effective principle adopted by Advocates for Education is the group’s commitment to remain positive and polite, respectful of all points of view. As a result, AFE is viewed as reasonable and well-prepared, qualities that make its voice even stronger.

AFE’s founders believe one of their missions is to recruit new leaders. Cumberland parent Marie Greco is a first-year member of the AFE board. “It is an honor to join a group that has greatly influenced our community for the betterment of education for our children,” she says.

The kids whose parents met at the kindergarten door back in 1993 are in high school and college now, but this year’s kindergartners have the same chance to benefit from a grassroots group working for a cause that couldn’t be any closer to home: quality schools for children in Whitefish Bay

