



MEMO

Interviews with Community Advocates for Public Education

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Project Background

In summer 2019, we conducted 35 interviews with a total of 37 local public school advocates across the state of Wisconsin. We conducted these interviews to learn how local advocates value their public schools, interact with their public schools, and support their public schools. We also wanted to understand the various roles that local K12 public schools play for students and non-students in their communities. We undertook these interviews believing that state-level officials should listen more to community voices and that community voices should play a greater role in shaping K12 education policy in Wisconsin.

Our interviewees serve a variety of roles in relation to public schools and education. Some of our interviewees volunteer for community-based advocacy groups. Others hold local public offices such as school board member. Another group of interviewees are employed as teachers and other education professionals who see their work as extending beyond the classroom into advocacy. Other advocates work for non-profits and education associations.

To elicit a wide range of perspectives, we sought to create a diverse pool of interviewees. Of the 37 people we interviewed, 26 identify as white, 7 identify as African American/Black, 2 as Native American and white, and 2 as Latinx. Nine of our interviewees explicitly position themselves as advocates for rural public schools. In terms of geography, we met with advocates from across the state, including Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Racine, La Crosse, Wausau, Superior, and numerous other cities and towns.

The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, ranging in length from 50 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes. Our interviews addressed five main topics: advocates' backgrounds and aims; their assessment of state-level policies and discourse; their ideas for the future of public education in the state; their views on the relationships of local public schools and community; and their perspective on the relationships among education, community, and democracy.

Our interviewees expressed varying degrees of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their local public schools and public education generally in Wisconsin. Advocates did not necessarily agree on specific education policies; for instance, they expressed different degrees of openness to

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charter schools and the potential for public and private schools to work together. However, none of our interviewees identified themselves as supporters of efforts to privatize public education. We did not ask advocates about their political party affiliations.

Interview Themes:

Three main themes emerged across the interviews: schools and communities, building networks, and legislative challenges.

1. Schools and Communities: Representing different backgrounds and perspectives, our interviewees articulated an expansive understanding of the contributions that public schools make to their local communities and the connections between schools and communities. The value of public schools for their communities and local support for public education extends beyond the classroom to highlight public schools as vital local institutions.

Public schools serve as keystones in connecting individuals and addressing community needs. Interviewees discussed different relationships—friendship networks, civic connections, getting to know people from different backgrounds—that schools facilitate. Schools host and support various activities: theater, sports, local meetings, baby showers, voting sites, and more. Schools also foster a shared sense of identity. Schools may address basic needs like food and medical care, stabilize the lives of children in transition, and gather local communities in times of crisis.

Public schools hold the potential to model inclusive democratic practice in classrooms, in the organization of a school, and in communities. They may help students develop their sense of agency and discover their voices. Organizing schools to incorporate student and parent voices and to promote wider community collaboration may impart valuable lessons and create spaces where everyone can feel welcome and heard. Further, vibrant, local democratic practices may create diverse stakeholders and generate wider support for public education.

The advocates we interviewed exemplify a practice of community as an active network of human relationships. While the term community can refer to a group of people or a geographical area, this “active” sense of community is important in emphasizing that support for public education depends on vibrant, productive relationships that enable individuals to identify common interests and work together to achieve shared goals.

2. Building Networks: Advocates underscored the need to build relationships across local communities. In particular, a number of interviewees discussed the need to build relationships among rural and urban communities. Some interviewees addressed the efforts that they had undertaken towards this end, but all of the interviewees who raised this point supported additional efforts to create and sustain active rural and urban networks.

Interviewees explained the value of diverse community relationships in various ways. They noted that both rural and urban areas confront some of the same challenges and issues with state education policy, particularly funding issues. Some interviewees recalled experiences working with rural-urban collaborations and the valuable lessons they learned through these processes. These interviewees and others stated that rural-urban alliances may generate solidarity and

increase advocates' morale, especially for people participating in small groups who may feel isolated within their local towns and cities.

Advocates explained that building diverse networks requires opportunities for dialogue so that people may reflect on their perceptions of others and recognize shared interests and concerns. Some interviewees described activities that brought together people from different backgrounds and perspectives, such as forums and speaking events, trips and outings, coordinated civic action and protest. Others described activities in their cities and towns that brought together diverse stakeholders. As these examples demonstrate, it is important to generate awareness within one's own community about the benefits of recognizing wider connections and shared concerns.

Practicing community as an active network of human relationships means that individuals participate in multiple communities and that different senses of community circulate within particular cities and towns. Sometimes, these differences can be sources of division. Among our interviewees, advocates from larger cities mentioned race as a potential source of division, while advocates from smaller towns pointed to religion and class as potential sources of division. Here, too, purposeful efforts at dialogue may enable people to articulate shared values, ideas, and goals to overcome division and to build diverse relationships.

3. *Legislative Challenges:* Identifying one legislative challenge, several interviewees observed that big money and insider lobbying facilitated the statewide expansion of private vouchers and other market-based education policies. They identified a handful of individuals and groups leading the efforts to create and expand education privatization in the state. Against this challenge, community advocates can respond with grassroots level people power and bottom-up pressure.

Some interviewees described legislators' behavior as a second challenge, recounting personal interactions with representatives that ranged from disregard to outright hostility toward constituents who disagreed with them on state education policy. Interviewees described instances in which legislators refused meetings, skipped candidate forums, made decisions ahead of public input sessions, and disregarded facts and data that did not fit their ideologies. A few interviewees voiced frustration with what they regarded as inconsistent behavior from pro-public education legislators.

Several interviewees indicated a third challenge as inequities and confusion in school financing. Some interviewees noted that revenue limits effectively judged a child living in one district as more valuable than a child living in another district by virtue of their zip code. Funding formulas created confusion in local communities, suggesting that local property taxes generated greater funding for public schools than the amount that schools actually receive. Some advocates described actions that they had undertaken to promote funding transparency, including supporting local pro-transparency resolutions and circulating fliers that explained the proportion of local public tax dollars redirected to private schools in particular districts.

Action Steps

Based on the recommendations of our interviewees and our background as Communication scholars, we offer the following potential action steps:

- Since communication always occurs in contexts, advocates should consider their goals and audiences for every communication initiative or campaign.
- To engage effectively with different audiences, advocates should identify and practice different communication strategies (e.g., hosting public events, canvassing door-to-door, facilitating group discussions) suitable for particular contexts to achieve various goals.
- Advocates should try to shape the public conversation on education by (1) addressing potential negative perceptions about public schools and (2) sharing success stories about students and the ways public schools connect to communities.
- Schools and community members may work together to bring various stakeholders to schools so that these stakeholders may observe daily classroom activities and better understand the contributions of public educators.
- Recognizing the hard work involved in sustaining their efforts, advocates should look for opportunities to find joy and camaraderie in their work.
- Advocates may combine short-term tactical strategies (e.g., addressing biennial state budgets) with long-term efforts (e.g., circulate ideas and images of schools as community keystones) to change the political and policy environments in Wisconsin.
- Vibrant local community activities (e.g., public forums, go-to-school events) can recruit new advocates, increase support for public education, and reshape the political culture in which education policy is made.
- To realize the democratic potential of public education, schools and communities may engage young people as citizens and future leaders (e.g., modeling democratic decision-making in classrooms, soliciting and sharing student perspectives, connecting student groups with wider advocacy networks).
- Coalition-building entails recognizing shared interests and respecting differences; cross-issue coalitions can strengthen a pro-public education message.
- Lasting, positive, structural change will only happen from the ground up!

*** If you have questions or seek additional information, please contact Robert Asen (robert.asen@wisc.edu) or Kelly Jensen (kelly.jensen@wisc.edu).