

## Vote Yes on school board election reform by Carla Bates

The School Board Reform statute requires the MPS School Board to vote on a plan to change how the school board is elected – moving from a city-wide election of seven representatives to a model that follows the park board elections: 6 areas and 3 at-large representatives – or the proposed change would go to the voters.. The Board will be voting on the statute on November 13th. If the board votes yes then the reform will be implemented for the 2008 election cycle. If the board votes no then the proposed change will go to the voters in November 2008. The School Board Reform statute is also known by its nickname: the Davnie Bill which is a misnomer as it is supported by the entire Minneapolis delegation and is actually now a statute.

I respect people on both sides of the issue and I have simply been unwilling to decide one way or another. As someone who is suspicious of referendum politics in general, I was very skeptical of the need for such a structural change. Supporters of reform argue that regional representation would make officials more responsive than do city-wide elections, whereas people opposed to reform believe it will make the job of governing the district even more difficult as members would tend to be provincial and that the school board would be more about “me and mine” rather than “us and ours.” Although I was very frustrated by the unresponsiveness of the previous board, I thought an electoral overhaul of the board would be enough to bring about more responsiveness.. And I think it has – the current board is much more functional than the previous one and I think the new members have lived up to their promises to stay in touch better.

Yet, I have decided – finally – to support school board reform and urge the board to vote in favor of the Davnie Bill.

Why am I coming out in favor of School Board Reform at this time? It's because I don't think the Board has been responsive enough and it is NOT because they haven't tried. All of them – Tom, Pam, T, Chris, Lydia, Peggy and even Sharon – have been very engaged over the past year. I just don't think that it is humanly possible to know the district well enough to be able to insure that the reality of what is going on in our schools is well understood at the board level.

And I think the board needs – NOW MORE THAN EVER – to do all that it can to truly understand what is up in the district.

I support school board reform because board members have to be encouraged to focus on specific areas, bring forth the stories of the families and students and teachers in those areas. Minneapolis is one of the most segregated cities and most segregated school districts in the nation. The needs of one part of our community are quite different than the needs of other parts of our community. It's crucial that we understand the needs of ALL parts of our city in their uniqueness and in depth. Minneapolis is not the predominantly homogeneous district that it once was and the Board should reform itself to address the overwhelming diversity that must be nurtured and supported if we are going to become a whole city.

As some know, I am running for school board ([carlabates.org](http://carlabates.org)). I have also been very, very involved in our schools. I could probably tell a little meaningful vignette about almost every single school in the district. I track test scores, I seek out different parent and teacher and administrator voices. I worry about special ed and I worry about national merit scholars. My kids go to magnet and community schools. I have a kid at South, a professional commitment at Edison, and I volunteer on a North High SLC advisory board.

It has been VERY unfortunate that School Board Reform has been touted as a problem of regional representation – an issue of the North, Northeast and Southeast against the Southwest. It is wrong for people to continue these bad politics of one part of the city against another. Yes, there are political realities about votes and money that favor the Southwest. But, good for them for paying their taxes, supporting the previous referendum, doing their duty and voting. Good for them and thank you, Southwest. It is also clear that Southwest parents aren't necessarily all that privileged at the MPS table as the High School Reform Firestorm has done great damage to morale in the Southwest. I hope we can all recover.

As I have been around the city campaigning, I realize how much there is to know, how few hours are in a day, and how board members need to be encouraged to specialize in understanding certain schools so that the issues at a Tuttle or a Lincoln, a Kenny or a Loring would be well understood by someone on the board well

before those frantic meetings when parents are pleading their case at the midnight hour. Furthermore, maybe if the board did have a collection of specialized knowledge about the different schools, perhaps problems could be averted before they led to people leaving the district. For instance, there is no middle school program support for autism in Area B. I have brought this to the attention of almost everyone on the board and almost everyone in administration. And there has been no response – no one seems to be owning that problem. And it is discouraging.

Finally, I have been asked how I would run if School Board Reform were enacted? I will/would run as a city-wide candidate. Even though I am feeling frustrated with my inability to know all the schools, I do think I have a very good picture of the competing interests and will be able to balance needs across the city. I just would really like the input from fellow board members who would be able to point out the real and inevitable gaps in my understanding, keeping me humble and open to the real human lives that make up our schools and our district. I am a good city-wide candidate and I will always be listening to all parts of the city .

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. . . but I only have two ears. Each individual school community needs at least one person who can listen to them, who can truly get to know them for better or ill, who can personally own their problems and celebrate their victories.

Vote yes on School Board Reform.

\*\*Notes on special issues:

1) Why not let the voters decide? As mentioned, I do not like referendum politics. The California experience should have taught us all about how vicious such politics can be. The Minnesota legislature gives the Board its sovereignty and now the legislature has told it that it could decide to accept the changes or throw it to the voters. Board members should vote their conscience – if they don't believe in it they should vote no; but if they do believe in the reform, they should vote yes. The legislature did not propose the change and give the board a choice just to have it sent to the voters; the legislature wanted to give the board a choice: the board should choose. Finally, I also do not want this referendum on the

ballot with the levy referendum– if the levy is close, this referendum could hurt us.

2) Park board districts? I do not think the park board districts make sense at all. I think a four quadrant approach would make sense with three at large – one for North, one for Northeast, one for SouthEast, and one for Southwest with three at large – perhaps one appointed by the mayor. The areas should include schools along the full pathways for children – prek–12. I also favor fewer board members rather than more – especially as the district downsizes. I have lots to say about how I would do it differently – but that is a moot point until the school board vote on November 13th.

3) What about racial diversity? Some people have noted that the racial diversity of the Board – a diversity of which we should all be proud – may be endangered by going with regionally–elected members. And this has been borne out in the city council, the Mn legislative delegation, and the Park Board. I am not convinced by this argument because of the power of incumbency: Minneapolis has helped candidates of color get elected when long–standing incumbents have stepped down – Martin Sabo and Wes Skoglund for two. I just am not sure that the proposed structure will be any less representative. It could be but I don't think it is inevitable. I do think it will be more feasible for working people or people with children to run for the board – again, it's simply a matter of logistics and human capacity