

THE Center for Education Reform



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TO: CER Friends, Media and pundits

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FROM: Jeanne Allen

RE: An exclusive interview with John Gardner

In a local race that drew national attention for its significance for school choice, John Gardner on April 6 was reelected to his post on the Milwaukee school board, a post he's held since 1995. National and local opponents of reform targeted Gardner, a democratic organizer and father of three Milwaukee Public School students. He spoke to CER president Jeanne Allen in a special interview April 8th.

CER: Why is your reelection significant?

JG: There are two reasons. The first is that everywhere across America whenever any member of a public school board speaks out in favor of school choice or real charters, teachers unions have defeated that person in the next election. My reelection is the first time that a strong supporter of school choice has not only survived a half million dollar targeted school board campaign, but also carried a whole reform slate with them.

CER: Who are the others who won a seat on the school board?

JG: Marvelous human beings. There is a thirty-year veteran of the police force – a decorated, national hero, named Michael Waring. He now heads the security program for the city of Milwaukee housing authority.

Jeff Spence is a 38-year-old African-American chemist and business manager who has 4 years experience on two MPS school councils.

Ken Johnson, 32-year old African-American electrician IBEW representative on the Milwaukee electrical joint apprenticeship committee, and a 34 year old lawyer named Joe Dannecker also won; he has four daughters.

JG: The second reason is because Milwaukee is the center of the choice and charter movement in the country. Now we're really going to see how people who believe in public schools can respond and compete.

CER: It's not your intention to gut the schools, as your detractors suggested?

JG: Our intention is to beat the Catholics, beat the Lutherans, beat the other Independents, and beat the suburban schools to attract the parents, students and dollars.

Our motto in this campaign was "Stop complaining and start competing."

CER: So your sense is that choice, charters and public education are not mutually exclusive?

JG: Not in our minds.

Understand, if you look at the five candidates who won, and by the way, they are joining pro-choice candidates, to give the board a 7-2 majority. The five of us have a whole different opinion of choice and charters – from me the leading "anarchist," to Jeff Spence who really doesn't agree with choice and charters. But even Jeff Spence thinks its absurd to sit there complaining, and instead, wants to

start improving schools. In his schools, he got control of the school and the staffing and they started improving.

Our board is now saying we need competition as the catalyst to improve.

We know for a fact in at least 2 districts that a majority of MPS teachers voted for reform candidates.

CER: Because?

JG: Because as they see it – partly they’re voting for their own children, and partly because they now understand that their futures are aligned with success rather than the status quo.

CER: What are the kinds of things you can see yourselves doing to improve the school?

JG: Chartering a lot of MPS schools.

We’re going to be moving somewhere between 80 and 95 percent of per pupil funding into the schools.

We’re going to be giving any school that wants it the authority to hire their own teachers. We’re going to be creating before and after childcare at every school where 12 or more parents want it. In overcrowded areas, we’re going to be coordinating after and before care among MPS and private and religious schools.

We’ll close at least 3 and up to 7 schools every year until we have no more continually failing schools.

CER: Were these pro-public education issues talked about during the race?

JG: Continually.

Our new coalition – when we take office April 26th – is not going to wait for a year to do all these things. We’re going to do them in time for the next school year.

And most importantly, we’re going to have a steadily increasing number of students coming to Milwaukee public schools.

CER: And the Governor?

JG: The Governor called to congratulate me the night of the election. He was very supportive.

CER: What is the most important thing national school choice leaders can do now?

JG: Send money to Dwight Evans [a Philadelphia State Representative and candidate for Mayor]... now!

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