

My name is Susan Tiernan and I am here to speak in support of non-partisan school board elections and SB 327. Clearly, politics and school boards should not mix. And in West Chester, they did not in fact really mix until 2009. Let's be clear. The Republican Party of Chester County has always chosen the candidates for school board through their endorsement process. Anyone who wanted to be on the West Chester School Board went before the local Republican Committee people; whomever that group chose became Board members. That worked well -- so long as you were a Republican, or became a Republican, or called yourself a Republican -- for almost fifty years. No Democrat was ever elected to the West Chester School Board, although some Republicans quietly re-registered as Democrats along the way.

Some switch was thrown in 2009. The rising Tea Party spoke publicly of their intention to "take back the party" and to "fill local political positions" (referring to the school board as a political position) with their candidates. Chester County Republican officers began attending school board meetings, keeping close tabs on voting and making many calls to the Republicans on the Board either praising, or more often criticizing school board members who strayed from the party line.

In June of 2011 a group of parents and community members decided that a school board controlled by county politics was not functioning in the best interests of the district and its 12,000 children. The group named itself West Chester VOTE and found six candidates to run for the seats open in 2011. We were Republicans,

Democrats and an Independent. We had two former board members, several educators, and parents; the most critical criteria for our becoming candidates in this uphill campaign was that we had to run as non-partisan and pro-education. We began our official write-in campaign in August for the November election. We put fliers on cars and sent out emails by the thousands. The Republican candidates (and the party) were furious. They accused us of abusing/disrespecting the electoral process and refused to join us at any forum or debate or “meet the candidates” event. So, we had forums, “debates” and meet the candidates events with our own six people as well as the lone Democrat and Independent candidates who were on the ballot. In November, in a splendid exercise of Democracy, our candidates got 40,000 write in votes. When all the ballots were counted, several weeks later, we had managed to get one of us on the Board. Me. Others were close ahead and behind, but we only got one person on the board, which is an unusually unbalanced 8-1 board, even in Republican Chester County.

Should politics and school boards be married in this way? Most decidedly not. Candidates should run on their backgrounds and their views on education, and a community should be able to choose a school board based not on political party, not on confusing “cross-filings” but on clear motives and qualifications.

Susan Tiernan

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STEM Academy, Downingtown PA

Senate Education Committee Hearings