

Divided on Diversity

Springfield School Board race gets biblical.

This spring, three of the five seats on the Springfield School Board are up for re-election. **Sally Hales** challenges incumbent **Jonathan Light** for Position 2, **Jeff Bantz** takes on incumbent **Al King** for Position 3, and **Wade Richardson** opposes incumbent **Bill Medford** for Position 5.

Bantz and Richardson's campaigns, in particular, have captured the attention of local media. Yard signs popping up in Springfield display the two names, Bantz and Richardson, together. Local Christian conservatives laud Bantz and Richardson — both Mormons — as heralds of overdue change, while the Oregon Bus Project characterizes the pair as religious extremists trying to take over a moderate public school board.

The most contentious issue in the campaign seems to be the district's developing diversity policy, which aims to identify relevant issues and assist with the development and implementation of a diversity action plan. According to Springfield High School Assistant Principal

Carmen Gelman, the plan is sorely needed: Kids are bullied for their race and orientation, among other things, and neo-Nazi graffiti defiles student lockers.

About a dozen core members of a diversity committee crafted the original diversity plan over the period of two and a half years, finally presenting their proposal to the school board in fall 2004. The plan offered this guiding principle: "Establish an understanding of diversity that encompasses a wide range of differences, including but not limited to age, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, physical appearance and physical and mental abilities." 4J's policy identifies similar diversity guidelines.

The plan didn't go over smoothly at the October 25 school board meeting. Eighteen people spoke explicitly against the plan — mainly due to the sexual preference language — and 12 spoke in support. The board voted to scrap the original plan and convene a new committee composed of a wider cross-section of community members. The result was the Safety and Respect for All (SRA) committee, which aims to reach a consensus and present its recommendations to the school board for approval by mid-June.

EW had to take candidates' words regarding contributions because campaign finance reports are not due until May 5 — past deadline for this issue. Look for a follow-up next week. Ballots are due by May 17, and elected board members' terms begin on July 1.

Position 3: Al King vs. Jeff Bantz



AL KING

A Springfield resident for 30 years and a school board member for three, financial consultant **Al King** is co-founder of the Springfield Education Foundation, a past president of the Springfield Chamber of Commerce and a former state representative. He has an adult daughter who graduated from Thurston High School. He spoke with *EW* in person.

Jeff Bantz, a claim adjuster, has lived in Springfield for 18 years. His eldest son attended K-12 in Springfield public schools, and his youngest son is a junior at Springfield High. Bantz declined to speak with *EW* in person, but he answered questions by e-mail.



JEFF BANTZ

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: More than half of Springfield's 10th graders score below state averages for reading and math. Latinos, comprising 10 percent of the district's students, are the biggest and fastest-growing minority group in the district, but they consistently score lower than other ethnic groups on standardized tests.

Bantz suggests swift action but is hazy on the details. "The District needs to be responsive," he wrote. "Our Latino students need to be immersed in our English-speaking educational system in order to understand and learn what is being taught."

King offers a more specific vision. "There's concern that some Hispanic parents don't feel comfortable meeting with teachers, perhaps because of the language gap," he says. He supports improved

bilingual communications and foreign language training, and he is exploring the idea of forming a district-wide Hispanic PTA.

PERSONNEL DIVERSITY: The Springfield Public School District's employees are roughly 93 percent white, 1 percent African American, 3 percent Hispanic, 2 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1 percent Native American. The district's Equal Opportunity and Workforce Diversity policy places a high value on the employment of qualified people reflecting diverse cultures and national origins.

Bantz says that he does not endorse preferential hiring for staff members of color. "In hiring and everything else, we should be colorblind," he wrote. "Teachers should be hired on the basis of their qualifications."

King encourages a concerted effort to hire more Spanish-speaking employees. Resources might not allow the district to hire translators, he says, "but having Spanish language skills would help prospective future employees."

THE DIVERSITY PLAN: **Bantz** opposes identifying groups of students vulnerable to harassment. "By labeling groups we are making a statement that some groups are more protected than others, and this is very divisive," he wrote.

In **King's** opinion, LGBTQ and minority students need extra protection. "Whatever we can do to reduce bullying is important," he says. Protection, he adds, is not advocacy. "It would be illegal for teachers to hold students captive in a class and teach them sexual preferences," he says. "A school election shouldn't be a referendum on sexual preference."

CHURCH AND STATE: Asked whether he would bring his religious beliefs to the school board, **Bantz** replied, "Sure. Everyone's views and values are affected by their religious or non-religious belief system." Bantz supports teaching both creationism and evolution in biology classes.

King also identifies as a Christian, noting that all of the other current school board members are also Christians. He stresses his belief in the strict separation of church and state.

CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS: **Bantz** declined to discuss his contribution sources other than to say that he has not received money from any political parties or special interest groups.

King said that all of his campaign contributions are from private individuals, including himself.

Position 5: Bill Medford vs. Wade Richardson

Bill Medford, a real estate broker, has lived in Springfield for 54 years. He served on the Springfield Board of Education from 1972-1989, and he has three adult daughters. He missed his scheduled interview, but he answered most questions by phone.

Wade Richardson, a financial analyst, has eight children, all of whom are former, current or future Springfield public school students. He sits on the SRA committee. Richardson scheduled an in-person interview with *EW*, then canceled it and said he would only answer questions by e-mail. When Richardson missed that deadline, *EW* offered an extension. Richardson's terse response: "After rereading your questions, I feel like they have nothing to do with professional journalism." The interview questions were virtually identical to those posed to other candidates.

To fill in the blanks, *EW* relied on documents from public meetings and interviewed Springfield resident Dennis Shine, who is a member of the 4J equity committee, the education chair for the local NAACP, the Springfield representative on the LCC school board and a regular observer at SRA committee meetings.

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: In an interview with *The Springfield News*, **Richardson** described the rising numbers of Latino students as a "heretofore-unknown challenge," saying that "the district needs to act prudently and swiftly to manage it effectively." According to Shine, Richardson objected to sending bilingual school notices to Spanish-speaking parents, saying that they should learn to speak English. Richardson also reportedly opposed the district's annual participation in the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day celebration.

Medford says that the district is evolving to accommodate the needs of a growing Latino student population. "We have to adapt to that, whether it's the English barrier or other parts of their culture," he says. He supports bilingual education.

PERSONNEL DIVERSITY: At one SRA committee meeting, **Richardson** distributed excerpts from a speech by Colorado Gov. Dick Lamm stating, in sum, that multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism can destroy America. During another committee conversation about increasing personnel diversity, Richardson reportedly asked, "You mean we have to interview minority candidates?"

Medford could not be reached for a response to this question.

THE DIVERSITY PLAN: **Richardson** objects to any language in district policy that would explicitly protect gay students. At a recent SRA committee meeting, Richardson called homosexuality both a tax and a health burden. "Richardson is advocating for the removal of [LGBTQ students] as a protected class," Shine says. "He stated at one of the meetings that he views sexual orientation as a choice."

Medford supports the inclusion of LGBTQ students as a protected group. "We want to have a safe place for children to go to school and not be teased and taunted, whether they're overweight or lesbian or whatever," he says. "Our main purpose is not to have the kids afraid to go to school in the morning."

CHURCH AND STATE: Shine feels that **Richardson's** candidacy is an attempt to inject the Springfield public schools with specific religious beliefs, particularly regarding sexual orientation. "Richardson is a candidate for the religious right," Shine says.

Medford could not be reached for comment.

CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS: Rumors — but only rumors at this point — are flying about **Richardson's** campaign funding. An Oregon Bus Project flyer from April 21 claims that the Republican Party and the "radical right" are funding the school board challengers, possibly a reference to Richardson or Bantz or both.

Medford says that his contributions are all from private individuals, and that his campaign fundraising goal is \$3,000.



BILL MEDFORD



WADE RICHARDSON