

Madison School Board Candidate Interviews

March, 2004

Sam Johnson

JIM ZELLMER: *With me this evening is Sam Johnson, a candidate for the school board. Sam, could you describe your background for us briefly this evening.*

SAM JOHNSON: Okay. I am a father of two children and my children attend Lowell School on the east side of Madison. I live on the east side, and along with my wife, Mary, we raise our two children. I'm a self-employed landscaper and in the wintertime I'm learning some carpentry skills and I've recently become self-employed since my wife has graduated and got her master's degree in social work. So she does social work and I am pursuing my own job.

Prior to that I've worked in a number of other jobs, in sales, in mortgage lending, and even at Oscar Mayer. And I'm a graduate of the University of Madison, Wisconsin, with a bachelor of arts degree in political science. While in school I studied abroad and in France for two semesters I did a cultural exchange program in Durham, North Carolina, Central University. And I initially started school in La Crosse University, so I graduated in '86.

I'm from Elm Grove. I was raised there. My parents moved there from, I was born in California and my parents moved to Wisconsin in 1969 and I attended Brookfield Central High School. My parents are both educators. My mother is a public school teacher. She's retired now. She taught public school in New Berlin for 35 years, third and fourth grade. And my dad is a retired school principal in St. Monica's, Whitefish Bay, and taught a Catholic school k through 6. He received a doctorate's degree from Stanford and so I grew up oftentimes listening about discussions of education as well as politics and that's briefly a bit of background about me and maybe why I've started to move into this direction.

JIM ZELLMER: *So given your background, Sam, how do you feel that that prepares you to serve on the board if you're elected?*

SAM JOHNSON: Well I feel like I have a vested interest because I have two children in the public school system and with the background of being a parent, as well as being a self-employed businessperson struggling to make ends meet, and a homeowner I'm very conscious of my own personal budget, what the taxes are doing in the community, and I'm looking very much so at the schools to see how they are delivering a product, and I would like very much for my kids to have the best education they could possibly receive. So I think those main factors are pretty much my driving forces and pretty much why I would be seeking these positions.

JIM ZELLMER: *If elected, Sam, what would you hope to accomplish your first term?*

SAM JOHNSON: Well I would like to, if I'm elected I feel like I would like to work with the other members of the school board and raise the issues that I feel are important, and that is mainly working within the budget of the school. I feel like the Madison school system is funded extremely well and it's just how they've chosen to spend their money, which is the main problem.

I feel that some of the biggest problems in the Madison public schools is the ethnic gap and the achievement gap. And I would like to air out, I would like to have a full debate on what are we not doing in the Madison public schools with the poor kids and the kids of the ethnic and the achievement gap that's going on there. And I feel like there's been a lack of debate as to looking into that problem specifically.

Generally I think there is an achievement gap across the board. I feel like we are funding our school system to be the best in the state and we are not. And until we are I think we need to look to make changes and improvements.

JIM ZELLMER: *What would you say your educational and financial priorities would be for the district? You mentioned, obviously, operating within the budget. Do you have any other educational priorities, for example, beyond this achievement issue and curriculum issues and things like that?*

SAM JOHNSON: Well I feel primarily we are in budget crisis because of a year and a half ago when they negotiated the labor contract they negotiated an excessively high contract which was only about four and a half percent, but the state mandated at 2.2% and if they would have stayed within that smaller increase we would have been in line with the budget and I would have also looked to make some restrictions in administration. So I would ask Mr. Rainwater(?) to do some consolidation in administration. I would have probably gone, possibly, for a little higher than a 2.2% raise, provided that the administration would concede to some consolidation. I feel like there's plenty of room there that could be made.

And it would really be my last thing to do would be to focus on the services that go to kids. I feel like that's the function of our schools is to provide these services and it really is breaking my heart to see where they're going to make the cuts for these kids. And basically they feel like they're not going to be able to pass a referendum and I don't feel like it should be an issue that should have gone to referendum either. But now they're not having this debate on what services they aren't talking about cutting, whether it's going to be sports, whether it's going to be strings, whether it's going to be the entire arts program or what. I'm still anxiously awaiting what they intend to cut, and it really concerns me. My priorities in the education system is to, I think, as I said before, there's enough money in the system currently to provide the full range of services that we currently offered. It's just that in the recent year and a half we have both gotten too far into the budget with labor costs, and that now it's affecting the children.

JIM ZELLMER: *Sam, what are your thoughts on the role of technology in the classroom, from elementary to high school?*

SAM JOHNSON: I feel that the role of technology has been a bit overstated as of late. I'm seeing a lot of investment in first generation technology, integrating schools, which I'm mostly familiar with. When I walk through there I'm not seeing a lot of utilization going on. And I'm feeling like you can use the Internet only so much in kindergarten, first, second, third grade. And I feel like there's been too much emphasis put on technology in the schools. I would rather see more of the basic programs be covered. I would like to see second generation technologies being utilized, going to businesses and asking for donations of their technology that they're transitioning over so then the kids could use some of the technology. But first generation turns into second generation in about five or seven years oftentimes. So you're paying for a lot and it's becoming obsolete very quickly. I would maybe have the focus move up into the high school levels to, you know, so that they can have some experiences with some higher technologies. And I wouldn't mind seeing more in science and things. But I'm not so high on all the computers and Internet. Sorry.

JIM ZELLMER: *Sam, today's public schools are in many ways the front lines of a great deal of our society's challenges from illiteracy to child care and basic nutrition. Can you comment on where you see this going and what role the schools and school boards should be beyond the core educational services.*

SAM JOHNSON: Well I'm looking at how our public schools are achieving right now. And I am currently not satisfied with the level of achievement, especially on how much we are investing into it. And I am not anxious to expand into other roles until we become the best in the state. Would I be willing to look into an expansion of these programs? I personally do not understand or favor at this time, maybe someone could explain why we'd want to move public education to the four-year-old . . . I understand there's issues of poverty, people in poverty. But perhaps we could have more tax incentives for those people in poverty to be with their own kids, which I view as the better alternative.

JIM ZELLMER: *Okay. Obviously you've had a very wide range of experiences in your career and you've now chosen to jump into the political arena. Sam, what career advice would you give to today's students as you think back to your experiences . . . what you're doing now?*

SAM JOHNSON: Well for me, my career exploration has been a very long and difficult one because in high school and well into college I didn't really know what I wanted to do. So, but when I got married with my wife, that was a big motivating factor or big direction thing. I felt like I had something to fight for in this world. But still I was searching for things. And I think it comes down to pursuing your passions. And I think eventually a person learns to pursue passions rather than dollars. And I would encourage people to pursue the passions and you will make a good living and you will be happy and perhaps you can be wealthy too, and that would be great. But I think it's

much more important to do what you want to be doing and to work to give yourself the opportunity to do what you want. And what I mean by that, by living within your means. And I think that's kind of theme I have throughout the campaign. I think the school needs to live within its means and budget within its means. And if you do that you're going to allow yourself opportunities to be able to pursue your dreams. And I think that's probably the most important thing.

JIM ZELLMER: *Finally, Sam, what political advice would you have for today's students? Again, you jumped into the game here and what advice would you have for other students and other people that might be considering running for office?*

SAM JOHNSON: I think that kids really would need to, at some point, like in high school, step back and start thinking that perhaps what my parents are saying is right, but I think I might have some other ideas. Or perhaps what my teachers are saying is right, but perhaps there might be another way of looking at things. And I think at some point kids do that naturally. I did. And I don't know how natural that is or normal that is. But I think that's good and healthy and I think learning how to think critically and analytically is important and trying to understand where you're thinking is coming from, whether it's an emotional thought or whether there's an analytical thought. So I would encourage kids to keep an open mind and know that people will disagree with you, and that's fine. And you will disagree with people and that's fine. That's really what a lot of life is all about. And that we can have our differences and still have a great conversation. So always just try to have an open mind when someone presents something that you don't agree with, and think about it, and then maybe you just agree to disagree. And that's fine.

JIM ZELLMER: *Okay, thank you very much, Sam. Good luck.*

SAM JOHNSON: Thank you.

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