

# What *Isthmus* doesn't report

School board member sees biased stories

By Carol Carstensen

Over the last two years, *Isthmus'* articles on the Madison school district, especially its approach to teaching reading, have reminded me of a favorite quote from Adlai Stevenson: "These are the conclusions upon which I base my facts."

The Madison school district has gotten a great deal of negative coverage from *Isthmus*, despite the fact that the district has seen continued improvement in the numbers and percent of children achieving at the two highest levels on the state's third-grade reading test.

This improvement comes at the same time as the district is ensuring that more students are tested, while the students themselves represent an increasingly diverse community. That is, more students in poverty, more students of color and more students whose first language is not English.

Here are some of the facts that *Isthmus* has ignored:

- ◆ Children learn, and learn to read, in many different ways.
- ◆ The district's Balanced Literacy program is not one method but an approach in which teachers are trained in different strategies to meet the needs

of individual children. This is why small class size at the primary level is so critical.

◆ Many teachers throughout the district are trained in Direct Instruction, and they use it when it is appropriate for a specific student or group of students.

◆ Reading Recovery is meant for the bottom 20% of the grade level, for the children who lag the most in learning to read. Of all the first-grade children who received Reading Recovery in 2002 and were still in the district two years later to take the third-grade reading test, 89% tested at grade level (66% scored proficient or advanced).

These are more appropriate figures for judging the program's effectiveness than the one *Isthmus* prefers to emphasize, the 53% who "successfully complete" the program.

**I am puzzled by the *Isthmus* focus on Lapham/Marquette.** Let me state up front that I think these two schools are excellent; my children went to Marquette, and my granddaughter went to Lapham and Marquette. The Lapham/Marquette staff is outstanding. However, there are also excellent

staff in many of the district's other schools.

In looking for outstanding performance on the third-grade reading test, *Isthmus* has ignored Schenk and Mendota elementary schools. Both have high levels of poverty. Schenk is at 49% this year, Mendota is at 74%, while Lapham/Marquette is 36%. Both Schenk and Mendota use Balanced Literacy as the core of their literacy programs, and their students have done extraordinarily well on the third-grade reading test. Looking just at low-income students, 85% at Marquette, 91% at Schenk and 83% at Mendota scored in the proficient or advanced range.

It is important for the community to have good information about the successes and failures of the school district. Good reporting, however, should reflect an objective look at *all* the data, not just selective data that supports a particular point of view.◆

CITIZEN IS A FORUM FOR *ISTHMUS* READERS. CAROL CARSTENSEN IS A LONGTIME MEMBER OF THE MADISON SCHOOL BOARD.

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