

Madison School Board Interviews

Ruth Roberts (February, 2004)

**JIM ZELLMER:** I'm with Ruth Roberts today and have a few questions regarding the spring elections. Ruth, can you describe your background for us, please?

**RUTH ROBERTS:** Sure. My general background, and probably the one most important to my School Board interest, is that I'm the kind of person for whom adequate, solid public schools were all the difference between, you know, a factory kind of a job or having the kinds of opportunities I've had. I was lucky enough to grow up in California. I'm part of the baby boom, so, you know, all of the facilities were, you know, generally behind us. There was a huge focus on getting us a solid education and, you know, at that point, federal money, state, was much more favorable into getting us into college. And that opportunity made all the difference in my life.

I have followed School Boards really since I was in high school in southern California because we had very ideological School Boards. We had, you may not be old enough to remember the John Birch Society . . .

**JIM ZELLMER:** Oh, yeah.

**RUTH ROBERTS:** . . . but very right-wing groups in southern California. One of those groups became the majority on the School Board when I was in high school and I saw them do things, like take out the more current textbooks and put in the ones that more met there. Ideological needs, even though it was already we were well into the Vietnam War, and we were looking at social studies textbooks that ended with Eisenhower's inauguration, you know, so I began to realize that that could be a really important position.

In terms of my own education, I have a bachelor's in political studies from Fitzer College in southern California, a master's in political science from the University of Illinois, a master's in educational administration from UW-Madison, and my J.D. from the UW Law School. And I went on to teach in Madison schools. So I have my, I no longer have active, but I've got a teacher's license, I did a high school social studies. And I had a principal's license because I was the principal at Malcolm Shabaz City High School and at the Working Learning Center, which now is several centers, at that point was just juniors and seniors and just in one program.

And, again, during those years, at Malcolm Shabaz, I noticed how many ways the, you know, School Board's vision for the kind of education you should have in your community has a very direct impact on kids' lives and in the quality of the programs. And it finally came to be that day when my own daughter, who went to Thoreau, to Cherokee, and to West, was out of college and I finally had the time, you know, given

job duties, and so forth, finally had the time to run for the Board. So I did that in 1997 and have been on the Board, this is the end of my seventh year.

In addition to having spent many years thinking about and studying education, in my legal career, much of what I've had to do is public sector labor law. I've been both management and union in a variety of settings. When I worked for, I worked for the State Healthcare Worker's Union for seven years, you know, so I was management within the union and bargained with our employees. And then I was the union one who bargained with the State of Wisconsin or, you know, Madison Public Health, and others.

So I've always felt like that's a good background, in terms of being able to look at issues from a number of perspectives, from the point of view from a mom, from the point of view, you know, I didn't go here because I was in California, but I was a student teacher, a teacher, a principal. I was a citizen member of School Board Committees when I was in law school. I've looked at it from a lot of points of view. And so that's, in a nutshell, my background.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Given your background, how do you feel that helps your aspirations for your next term, you know, the challenges that the District faces, in terms of, well, there's curriculum or financial, you know, how do you feel that that fits the Board and the city, the community as it were?

**RUTH ROBERTS:** I already said a little bit. I've learned both as an attorney and a teacher and, in some ways, a small businessperson when I was running for the union. That, actually, Rebecca Young, who was on the School Board long before me, told me something that's turned out to be very true. You get on the Board or you want to get on the Board because you love children, and you want the best education, and you find out that what you do all the time is the budget. And that makes sense.

I mean, that has been driven home to me, particularly as state and federal financing and state and federal requirements have made our financial situation much more difficult to deal with. The budget really is the place, just like it is in your business or it is in your home, where your priorities become clear. You can't do everything, so

...

**JIM ZELLMER:** Make choices.

**RUTH ROBERTS:** You're either the kind of family who, you know, puts it on the kids' education or puts it on the vacation. You're the kind of business who, you know, tries to balance, you know, employee stability and so forth with, you know, long-term planning.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Sure.

**RUTH ROBERTS:** And I think it's a very similar thing. What I think I've learned from seven years on the School Board is that we're coming to, I think we're already in a fairly critical time here in Madison. As a community, I think we very strongly support a very high-quality education for all of our kids. John Dewey, the educator John Dewey, once said a thing that I'm going to paraphrase because I never remember it exactly right, but what we should want is a community for every child, is what a good and wise parent

wants for his child because anything less is unlovely, that is his word, and undermines democracy. And I think that's the community we are.

We want for, you know, low income, middle income, we just got here last week, special ed. We want the best education we can afford because we want kids to have productive adult lives. And for this community that clearly, I think, includes very solid programs in math, science, reading, social studies, but also along with it, foreign languages, particularly now, where we're globalized and want our kids to know.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Right, right.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** You know, the more we have major Spanish-speaking sectors in our population, the more we do business with Asia, the more our kids need to know. All of our kids need to be exposed and learn and become as fluent as they can become in a foreign language. I think it extends to the fine arts. I think it's through drama. It's through drawing. It's through performance in various ways that you stretch your imagination.

And I was very interested in an informal survey that's been done at the University lately by a philosophy professor. He asked his college seniors, students who take academics pretty seriously, looking back on their high school experiences, what were the things that they put the most effort into, where did they really try to excel. And, you know, it's common sense in some ways, but they don't say it was that term that I sat by myself and did, and I got every footnote right, and I read everything.

What they say is competitive sports, science Olympiads, and drama, you know, pep squad, whatever it is, things that engaged them as people, things where, that have some of these things in common. The community supports them. The community rewards you. The community helps you raise funds. If you don't all show and do it in a certain way, you know, you fail the whole group. The project can't go.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Right, right.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** At the same time, it's a chance for you individually to excel. And I heard that comment a year or two ago and took it to heart. I think it's a good description of why we do a number of things that, in some people's minds, are not the core subjects. We do them because they engage kids, and they engage the imagination, and they bring in critical financial support, either from businesses or businesses or, you know, retired people, or whatever. They bring those things in.

Our challenge now is to continue to have that kind of a program and at time when we really do get mandates from the state and federal governments without the funds to carry them out and those become the givens in your budget. And we still have these things that are not mandated, but that are critically important, important to, I think, the support of our schools, important to keeping as many kids as we can in the public schools.

We've seen quite a growth here in private school and home-schooling in the last years and those are families who, you know, whether they're working two jobs to do it or they can just afford it, who care, you know, very much looking for a comprehensive curriculum for their kids, we have to keep them in the public schools because you need

that mix. I mean, that's back to the Dewey comment, it's that, it's important to democracy that as many kids as possible, regardless of ability or ethnicity or race are in the same programs, learning to work together, learning to have some things in common. And it's important financially.

So what I think I've learned over the last few years is that we do a good job as a District and a Board in reflecting back the vision that the community has for its education system. I don't think we do as good a job in involving the community and the business community in helping us solve the financial problems that go with continuing that. I may be skipping ahead, but, you know, I've gotten some press for having not supported the referendum on operating costs last year. And I've spent a lot of time having to explain and defend why it was I did that and it comes down in many ways to these things.

I think that when you can look down the road and see you have diminished or barely stable financing, and you can see some things you can see in our budget. Currently, competitive sports as wonderful as it is, and I don't want to cut it, it's wonderful, I don't want to cut it. As wonderful and as much as it communicates to kids, we currently subsidize competitive sports at the high school level to the tune of \$1.6 million a year.

You know, they talk about fees and revenues, but when you look at the overall, you know, \$1.5 million is coming out of tax dollars, you know, and, you know, fees are still going up, but we have \$1.5 million there at the same time that we've put textbooks on hold. We've frozen textbook expenses. We can't afford a third recess at the elementary schools, even though the Center for Disease Control and our Pediatrics Association, and I would say, kids need this, they need, you know, they need to be out, they need to play, they need to exercise in order to be productive learners.

There are a number of things where we need to kind of get into a better balance what we've been doing. In terms of competitive sports, I think we need to say to the community right away, and we should have done it during this last year, we need \$1.5 million some way or another in order to sustain this and not price families completely out of the market with fees. That may be higher ticket sales. That may be, you know, direct infusion of funds from businesses, but it's the kind of thing that's critical to kids, it's critical to the community.

Tax dollars coming as much as they do from private residential tax dollars can't be supporting that over other kinds of things. We're facing a slightly different question with fine arts where we've been gradually pulling back a little here and a little there in those entry level, you know, well, entry level is not the right word, elementary school-age fine arts and I think that's a wrong direction.

I think we have gone through that enough to know that fees alone won't be the solution, but we haven't gone to the community in a really wholehearted way and said again, you know, these are things you want and they have a real role in how kids grow and develop at school, but we're having a very hard time funding those off the property taxes. All of us know the property tax burden is too high. It's disproportionate to what corporations pay, to what any . . . pay, and it puts us in the position by they're not having those programs and, again, losing students to private schools, to other communities, to home-schooling, or we need to be saying to people, there has to be a different kind of partnership between the schools and the general community.

So looking back on, again, on this year's, I felt that we did not make, we don't make our budget process clear enough to people so they can engage in discussions with us about priorities or how to do it. It's almost unintelligible budget process. It's very difficult for people to try to follow why we're, you know, suddenly going to cut wrestling and, but everything else, you know, has a higher, you know, what was the process.

So I think, in terms of process, I've learned that we need to be much more open, much clearer, and that, in turn, means we have to be clearer about how we evaluate per . . . why is this kind of math and not that kind of math, you know, why do we continue to do something called re-recovery in first and second grade. It's a very expensive way to deliver fundamental reading skills to kids who are behind. It's effective with most of the kids who are targeted for it, but it's not effective with all kids in that category and it's very, very expensive compared to some other models that are out there. We, as a Board, rarely, well, we don't look, we don't, we really just don't look at this delivery model, that delivery model, and other delivery models and what do they cost.

And, finally, I think, in terms of wanting to have, and we do want to have, a stable, high-quality teaching force, we have not looked at, we should have looked harder at the kinds of increases that we've built into the two-year contract, I felt very strongly. This is a community where people are losing jobs, are uncertain about their jobs, or senior kids get out of college and not get jobs or not get the kind of jobs they want, are working for the City, the State, the County and getting 0% increases, and losing health insurance, and, you know, along those lines.

And yet what we do with our employees is to go grant increased for two years that are 4.3% the first year, and 4.9% the second. We could not afford to do that and that's largely what generated the need for an operating referendum last year. The increase in wages for teaching staff and others required 7 million new dollars for this current school year. It'll require 8 million new dollars next year.

Last year's referendum, or last year's budget cap was just short of \$13 million. Okay, half of that was employee increases, and those increases play out across all the other units. What Madison teachers receive is then . . . as a matter of fact . . . kind of increase administrators get, substitutes get, you know, there are smaller groups and smaller dollars.

But I think we ought to have looked at a little bit more at what the City and County were doing. Because among other things, if we had done a 0% increase, teachers would have still received 3-1/2 because they get increases with seniority. It's not like the State 0% where 0 means, you know, you made \$24,000 last year, you make \$24,000 next year, and you're going to make \$24,000 until you get an increase. Ours has some built in and I think it's a good contract.

And I don't begrudge teachers the support, but I do think it's the Board's fault as stewards for the kids and for the community to ask hard questions about those things and just swallow really hard and say, you know, in these circumstances, we would rather keep you and hope that you can, you know, live on 3-1/2% than go up at such a rate that we are where we are, I think, this year. This year, you know, we'll go up another \$8 million for that same contract. We're already projecting a \$9.3 million gap and that'll change. That'll get a little better, a little worse, I'm not sure, but it's not going to go away because there's \$8 million in wages to begin with.

I don't think the community, I think we do a disservice if we say to the community, we know you want all these things, and we want all these things too, nonetheless, we make some employee decisions that are going to require a annual referendum or they're going to require a huge cut in classroom teachers, and that's unacceptable here. I'm a no vote on layoffs for teachers and probably a no vote on, you know, an operating referendum that we talked.

But what concerns me is during this last year, we have not made much progress, in terms of private partnerships to pick up things, you know, the kinds of things we hear when we get to the end of the budget process and we say, it's wrestling, it's, you know, strings in the fourth grade, and then people say, oh, but if you had told us, you know, we'd be happy to pay the other taxes or what about, you know, and particularly in the arts area.

What about the fact that the University is investing very heavily in a whole new upgrade of the fine arts facilities. The City has invested in Overture and we have as our City's future a dream to be a real arts, performing arts center, and yet in Madison schools, we're going to take that out, you know, and take that out for kids in particular who won't be able to get their violin lessons probably in the fourth grade. There's no way to find ways to do that.

**JIM ZELLMER:** So given all that . . .

**RUTH ROBERTS:** Yeah, it's kind of a long answer.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Right, given all you've been through in your experiences, as well as the criticism and praise you've had for your stance, so why are you running? Why are you running again?

**RUTH ROBERTS:** Well, because I think these, I have talked to a lot of people and I think, you know, I don't want to say I represent the majority of you, I can't say that, but I represent a viewpoint that people feel is somewhat lacking in the discussion and should be there. I've had people tell me, I don't always agree with you, but I think you ask questions that need to be answered, and I appreciate that, and I'll vote for you. And that's fundamental, I mean, I feel like I have the experience having done the Board seven years to be helpful in a budget process over the next three years. This is a three-year term.

And I would say, honestly, I had given lots to not running again because my day job is Dean of Students at the University of Wisconsin Law School. And one of the reasons I have that job is I would also like to return to teaching at the law school. I don't have time to be Dean of Students, preparing a law school level class, and keep up with the School Board. And so I thought very seriously last spring about not running, up and to the point where I began to talk to parents and others that I thought might like to, you know, I could support them.

And we hit that point with the referendum, where the Executive Director of the Teachers Union is in the press saying, you know, you are public enemy number one, and we're going to replace you. And what I found during that process was that it made other people a lot less willing to run and a lot less willing to be in my position. And so,

you know, as far as I could tell, if I didn't run again, that particular viewpoint just wouldn't be there this time. And so I'm hoping to kind of hold that conversation open and, you know, run again. This would definitely be my last term because that would be ten years and, you know.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Right. So if you went and served your three years and then you look back, what would you hope you would accomplish in that three years? What would make you say, yeah, this was worth it, this was worth the time and the energy?

**RUTH ROBARTS:** Some of the things I think I've already described in a way. I'd like to look back and say, you know, even though the Legislature, at both the state and federal levels, made it extremely difficult for us and shifting taxes to the wrong payers and so forth, I would like to help the community deal with that in the long term. And at the same time, in the short term, find a way to find the funds here so that we don't generate a little taxpayer revolt that will hurt our kids and hurt our teachers.

For me, there are many ironies. I was a teacher. I was a member of Madison Teachers, Incorporated. I was on strike in 1975. And I worked for a union for seven years full time. You know, I am not anti-employee. I am not anti-union. And I think I understand why, you know, how the union provides them protections that I would like all employees to see.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Sure.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** You know, I don't have a fight with the union. And I have a very fundamental long-term agreement with sort of the union or the liberal, or the, whatever you want to say, those folks who feel that residential property taxpayers are paying more than their fair share of all local services. And that we cannot continue, either the City, the County or the School . . . we cannot continue to load more services onto just the residential taxpayers.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Right.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** But, certainly, in addition to that, we can't, as a School Board, go up at twice the rate available for services.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Right, right.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** I mean, we just can't do that and still think that five years from now we'll have a comprehensive program, that private funders will be willing to put in the money, parents would be willing to pay for the, you know, the extra for the tickets or whatever.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Right.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** We're in a critical time. And I would just like to have a role during those three years in trying to move us off the discussion we had with the last referendum for education or . . .

**JIM ZELLMER:** Right, right.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** That's not fair. That was not fair to, I don't think that was a good characterization of many of the people who voted no.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Right, right.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** I think they were more concerned about how we managed the money, sort of getting back to division. I think we're a pretty, you know, we have some differences here, but, you know, if you're your age and you have kids in the schools, you're very focused on helping . . .

**JIM ZELLMER:** Of course.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** You know, but my generation received enormous support from, you now, my parents got the G.I. Bill. I got the National Defense loans. I got the Pell Grants when they still paid most of your, you know, college or graduate tuition. And that is the kind of thing that builds human capital, that builds us as a community, builds us as a nation, but it's getting harder and harder to sustain, that there are major things out there in the overall structure that we all need to struggle with.

But in the meantime, I think we don't have the luxury of saying, all the problems are at the State, and most of our problems come from the State and Federal level, and they need to get their act together. In the meantime, we need more residential property tax dollars. People are not able or willing to do that. And that concerns me greatly. And I would like to, in retrospect, have supported a few new, supported people who have the knowledge and wisdom I don't to propose new charters or lab schools or new ideas. I think we need to . . .

**JIM ZELLMER:** Revolution is a good thing sometimes.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** A little revolution is a good thing sometimes. And, you know, we're in an interesting position with that right now. Currently, the School Board can approve or not approve a charter school, you know, public and . . . and alternative, and it's our choice only. But the Legislature is talking about the University being able to fund those or the Counties being able to approve those, and I think, you now, I think it's crystal clear in Madison. If the School of Education had some good ideas about, you know, a way to combine foreign language from kindergarten up, there are a lot of parents here who would like their kids to do that. I would have liked to do that.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Sure.



**RUTH ROBARTS:** You would like your child to be learning Spanish or Japanese from the very beginning. And we could easily, in the next few years, lose our veto of that. So rather than, you know, relying on our opportunity to limit those or say no, I think we need to be thinking about how many good things have grown here. I mean, I'm still proud of my years at Malcolm Shabaz City High School. It is a much better school now, I think, than when I worked there, but that's because it had long-term support and was allowed to go its own way . . .

**JIM ZELLMER:** Its own direction, yeah.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** . . . to look for whatever the critical curriculum components are to get kids who are school avoiders to engage.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Great. Ruth, what are your thoughts on technology in the classroom from elementary to high school?

**RUTH ROBARTS:** Well, generally, I think that it's a hard thing to evaluate. I think I have seen some very interesting projects at the middle and high school level, where I think students are using technology, there's one at Shabaz City High School, where they're using the technology almost in the same way they'd use it if they were on the job, where they're doing it at a skill level where they then go to MATC and get certificates, and they're doing interactive discussions with students in Africa, you know, real time. Some of that, I think, you know, some of the applications, particularly in the graphics kinds of areas, do the things we want technology to do. They help kids imagine and work and construct things, and they make them familiar with computers that are part of pretty much everybody's job like these days.

I'm not sure that we, well, we don't have the resources to be providing up-to-date computers K-12. We certainly aren't providing, you know, state-of-the-art computers, you know, pretty much anywhere in this system. And I have, I'm less supportive of it in the middle, in the elementary schools, I think. A couple of things the Madison schools could do is to look at where our best technology is and that is not in the schools. It's in business services and central supplies. When they get done with some of their computers, they rotate it into the schools. I think that's backwards, I think, and we have high school kids and middle school kids who could use them.

But, again, it's a question of scarce resources and scarce resources are the most you want to see something that kids can interact with, like the electricity's off or when, you know, the computer's jammed or whatever, so I'm a little, you know, a little skeptical about what we're getting in technology.

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

**RUTH ROBARTS:** We're in a very difficult situation and your question highlights that. I think Madison is a good example of, over the years, as we see more and more children

coming to school without their basic nutritional needs met, and without health insurance, and without some of the day-to-day care they need, and sometimes without the money to pay for the prescriptions, for the asthma and so forth, we have developed a somewhat elaborate nurse and nurse assistance system.

We have in not as large a way development a, you know, security system and a policing kind of presence at the schools to deal with what are very frequently problems that begin outside in the neighborhoods or, you know, on the streets and come into the schools. Both of those things are in place for good reason, I think, because every kid deserves, you know, a safe school and every kid deserves adequate healthcare.

Those, however, are traditionally City and County services. And what happens to us is, because we have this, you know, part of our overall funding difficulty is we need to shift back to other units of local government those things that are not education per se. It's very expensive. I mean, one of the, you know, we talk about that unfunded mandates, one of the great unfunded mandates is special education, which I strongly support. I don't know how you cannot support a free appropriate public education for every child in the school closest to their home.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Sure.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** But in some cases, you know, that means a very high level of cost. That means medical intervention starting today, that means catheterizations, that means medications, and it brings, you know, the medical costs add up rather quickly, and none, you know, and what we get, in terms of State and Federal support for that is, you know, less than 25%, no, around 30% from the State and around 7% for the Federal Government. And all those other dollars come out of our budget . . . I don't begrudge the kids that service and I don't think anybody does.

But until we can shift some of the cost back to, you know, the schools aren't ever going to be in a position to solve the health insurance coverage problems and are, you know, building more and more medical and health services into the schools seems to be coming at the cost of the things that are traditionally our function.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Exactly. Okay, Carrie, why don't you read these last two there, that one.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** Hi, Carrie.

**CARRIE:** Hi. What career message would you have to get to today's students?

**RUTH ROBARTS:** My career advice would be that you would be, what grade are you in?

**CARRIE:** Fourth.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** Fourth grade. It's two things, I think, to take all your subjects seriously, you know, and do the best you can because everybody really needs to know how to read, how to do math, how to do science, where the United States is, you know,

or Mexico is, you know, how the world works, what's a democracy. You're going to need those things.

But it's also almost just as important, in some ways more important, for you to do those things seriously that you really like doing, whether it's art, whether it's music, whether it's sports, whether it's different every year. I think, many times, you don't know what your career is going to be and all the career opportunities are going to change, but you have at least, during kindergarten to twelfth grade, a lot of chances to figure out what Carrie's good at and really likes to do. And if it's art, you may find that math fits into that or, you know, drama you may find, you know, other things fit into it. But my career advice to kids is to try all of things that are available. Careers are going to change.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Okay. Kate, you have to question this one.

**KATE:** What political advice do you have for today's students?

**RUTH ROBARTS:** Political advice, do what you're doing right now. Ask political people questions. You may want to do, you may want to, you know, be a president or a School Board member or a mayor or something some day. But you're a citizen right now and I think the best advice is to ask people why they do what they do and to . . . watching.

**JIM ZELLMER:** Okay. Thank you very much, Ruth.

**RUTH ROBARTS:** No, thank you.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/1.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

