

Published January 16, 2005

Superintendents call him bond issues' 'kiss of death'

Paul Dorr of Ocheyedan helps Iowa taxpayers who want to defeat school-spending proposals.

By JENNIFER DUKES LEE
REGISTER STAFF WRITER

A northwest Iowa man is earning a reputation - and a living - as the newest threat to Midwest educators trying to raise money for new schools.

Paul Dorr, an activist and home-school parent from Ocheyedan, sells his services to taxpayers who want to derail school bond issues.

School superintendents are furious.

Tax watchdogs are ecstatic.

His name is familiar in Tama, Gilbert, Iowa City, Spencer, Independence and other Iowa towns where he has either designed campaigns to defeat proposals or marketed his services to prospective buyers.

"He's kind of a kiss of death for bond issues in a lot of places," said Spencer Superintendent Greg Ebeling.

Despite Dorr's efforts, voters in Spencer passed a \$4 million bond issue to help pay for a new middle school.

But the consultant has succeeded elsewhere.

Dorr's most recent victory came last month in the Avoca-Hancock-Shelby-Tennant school district, where he was paid \$3,000 to help defeat a \$5.6 million bond issue for a new elementary school.

By his own calculations, Dorr has designed campaigns to fight 24 school tax proposals, and successfully helped defeat 21 of them - at a savings for taxpayers of more than \$237 million. The levies were for buildings, or for overrides to legislative caps of growth to general budgets.

"I bring a breath of fresh air and some hope to a whole disenfranchised class of people who have lived in fear of the local public schools," said Dorr, a 48-year-old father of 11 children.

School officials are fed up. They say they would welcome a healthy political debate, but don't think Dorr plays fair. They complain that he twists data and intimidates people in his campaigns. One time Dorr reported South Tama school Superintendent Larry Molacek to police for not releasing public documents quickly enough.

"We're trying to do what's good for kids . . . yet we have someone coming in that spreads all kinds of misinformation," said Molacek, who led a seminar titled "One District's Response to a Hired Gun" at the Iowa Association of School Boards in November. About 80 people attended.

He said he plans to give a similar presentation at a national conference in February because Dorr's efforts are moving across the border.

"I have a file called 'Paul Dorr,' " said Les Norman, superintendent in Lake Crystal, Minn.

Norman and other superintendents say Dorr uses distorted statistics to try to make schools look bad, releasing the information just days before the polls open.

"He sends out a newsletter talking about how pathetic your district is, and that's powerful information," said Devin Embray, the school superintendent in Independence, where Dorr helped residents defeat a \$15 million bond issue for a new high school one year ago. "It's sad because a lot of that information was just not true."

Iowans who have hired Dorr praise his work.

Gary Hoskey, who was part of the group fighting the bond issue at South Tama, said Dorr helps voters make informed decisions by requesting public documents that identify problems in the school district.

"This is information that ordinary people don't know to ask for," Hoskey said.

Ronda Kirkpatrick, chairwoman of the group that hired Dorr to fight the Avoca area bond issue, added, "Without him, we'd

People's choice

AT THE POLLS: In Iowa, school bond issues for buildings must be approved by at least 60 percent of those voting.

IN THE VOTING BOOTH: In fiscal year 2003, schools held 25 total bond issues, according to the Iowa Association of School Boards. Fifteen passed. Six failed but had greater than 50 percent support. The remaining four fell below 50 percent.

AT THE STATEHOUSE: For many years, the Iowa Association of School Boards has favored lowering the level of approval to 50 percent for school bond issues, but Iowa legislators have not shown much interest in changing the rules.

be floating out here by ourselves."

Superintendents say Dorr's work is akin to ambulance-chasing. They say he contacts county auditors to identify upcoming elections, then calls farmers and other property owners in those districts to find disgruntled voters.

Dorr, though, said he gets calls from people who want to hire him. He defended his campaign techniques, saying he uses the government's own data on test scores, enrollment trends and payroll.

Superintendents question Dorr's advertising methods, claiming that he uses his own children's voices on radio ads. According to the superintendents, the children tell radio listeners that they fear the increased taxes will deplete their inheritance or take away money for things like new bicycles.

Dorr said the children are paid actors, though he wouldn't identify them.

District officials also describe Dorr as an outsider who tears apart a community, then walks away, leaving local residents to repair the damage.

"The community was divided greatly by the bond vote," said Embray in Independence. "When he leaves town, we pick up the pieces."

Superintendents point to Dorr's strident views against public education. But Dorr said his work isn't a personal crusade.

Instead, he said, he helps "even up the odds a little bit against the political machine that local school districts have become."

He questions why school administrators in rural Iowa, where population and enrollment are declining, are even considering building new schools.

"It's a bizarre phenomenon," Dorr said.

Dorr has called on other home-schooling parents to start their own political consulting services.

"In the struggle for true liberty and in opposition to tyranny, we need to become more offensive-minded and show that we have a superior educational program to replace the rapidly failing government system," Dorr wrote in an online essay. "And we need to do everything else we can to speed it on towards its certain demise."

Dorr has achieved Iowa fame before. His brother is Tom Dorr, who was appointed by President Bush as undersecretary for rural development. Tom Dorr failed to win confirmation from the Senate in 2002 but was later hired as a senior adviser in the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Paul Dorr was in the news at the time of the confirmation hearing because of a taped conversation that became an issue in his brother's nomination. In the conversation, Tom Dorr remarked that government officials might "raise hell" if they audited his participation in federal farm-subsidy programs. The other voice was purported to be that of Paul Dorr.

Paul Dorr also has gotten attention for his anti-abortion ministry and his Y2K survival views.

■ **[Click here to go back to article](#)**

Copyright © 2004, The Des Moines Register.

Use of this site signifies your agreement to the [Terms of Service](#) (updated 1/3/2003).