

**By BRIAN ACKLEY**  
**WIN Columnist**

More than one interested eye is being cast in the direction of the Orchard Park school district these days, trying to figure out where a nasty debate between the school board, administration, teacher's union and ultimately the voters will wind up exactly.

We won't get the answer to that until the public heads to the ballot box May 18. But in the meantime, it's a Quaker quandary of epic proportions – comparatively speaking – that has riveted many to the usually routine and mundane exercise of approving a school budget.

Seems Orchard Park is a little short this time around. In fact, the hole is in the millions of dollars. Even a contingency budget could cause a double-digit hike in the tax rate, one administrator indicated last week. School Board president James Crean is asking for some \$5 million in cuts. This is no nip here and tuck there, or reduction of a hall monitor, bus aide and some paper clips to salve the public relations perception of a board doing its job.

This is an over-the-top-ropo battle royale, the kind at which media salivate while all sides dig in as if defending life, liberty and the pursuit of a reasonable school tax bill is the equivalent of landing at Omaha Beach.

Crean is, among other things, proposing cutting some two dozen teachers, an announcement that school superintendent Charles Stoddard – who, by the way, is among the most respected school CEO's in the region by his peers – said he first heard about from the media.

Hundreds of people, obviously fueled by school unions protecting their turf, have showed up at meetings with prerequisite and perfunctory signs, slogans and acronyms. One teacher trotted out his daughter – who won't even be in kindergarten for another two years -- to hold a sign while he spoke to make sure a "quality education" awaited her. Happily, he apparently did not have to yell, "breathe, baby, breathe" in an effort to further turn a serious situation into a spectacle.

It's fascinating for many reasons, not the least of which is the school budget process itself. It's the one chance voters get to ultimately control where their tax dollars go. No other similar budget must pass public muster at the ballot box, and on occasion, voters use the process to reflect a broad-based feeling that elected officials in general aren't responsive enough to their concerns. Too bad voters don't do that in November once in a while too.

All this, by the way, is backdrop to a search for a new school superintendent. Less everyone think no one is paying attention -- even in an era where finding quality school administrators is admittedly getting tougher and tougher -- an embarrassingly low 22 people bothered to send in a resume. A decade ago, such a job would have produced three or four times as many candidates, and even today, should have produced twice as many applicants from which to choose.

The fury has even claimed one of the district's own, an assistant superintendent who many, including Crean himself, publicly said would be great for the job. When asked why he wouldn't seek the top post, the assistant said he made a list of things he viewed as "major barriers" to whoever eventually sits in that chair. "The list was quite extensive," one published report quoted him as saying. As usual, those in charge never saw it coming. Crean admitted he was floored, his word, upon hearing the news.

Let it be said, there is no tougher or more under appreciated public servant than that of a school board member. The investment of time, energy and emotion is equally as grand as those who get paid for their elected positions. And, the relationship between a school board – any volunteer board for that matter – and a group's CEO is always one of give and take. The board can no more be a rubber stamp for an unelected administration as an administrator can be a dictator over those they serve.

Rarely has figuring out how to get more for less been so challenging. Today Orchard Park, tomorrow where? It's why many of us will be watching.

*(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member*

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