School politics can be just as treacherous in a small town as in a big city, as the author discovered after moving from New York City to the town of Hudson (pop. 8,000) and found himself trying to reform the local public school district.
During the last weeks of my brief tenure as a member of the local public school board, I took to carrying around a copy of the Declaration of Independence. I felt a need to commune with ancestors who had suffered a "long train of abuses"—and done something about it. Only six months into my five-year term on the board, I was frustrated and angry. The town had been unresponsive to the stunning failures of the local school district—nearly two-thirds of our 4th graders couldn't pass a mediocre state reading test—and continued to show not even a pulse of concern. Not that everyone was happy with the way things were, but those few were resigned, or unaware, or simply afraid to speak up. I did speak up, and I will long remember the growling response of a teacher in my son's school: "How dare you show your face here!" Or a fellow school board member's laughing, "Pete, why do you say those things? Don't you know they have your kid?" It really did feel like a hostage situation. But what was I saying? That the system needed fixing. In this small town, however, that was like a stick in the eye. "Changing a school system," an educator friend reminded me, "is like moving a graveyard. You're not going to get any help from the inside."

My colleagues on the board were in their working prime, with jobs that held retirement potential and deep ties to the community. Not a group of boat-rockers. Dave owned a local...
Though the old town had been rediscovered by émigrés from New York City, few of the new arrivals had children. Thus, the economic renaissance had little impact on the local schools—except as a new source of revenue.

The Hudson school district was a kind of colonial outpost: most teachers through 8; and the high school incorporated grades 9 through 12. There was thus little geographic or cultural homogeneity—and no heart. In fact, with administrative offices located several miles from the nearest school, the district felt like a kind of colonial outpost: most teachers did not live in town and less than half lived in the district. The superintendent did not even live in the state. As I soon learned, the Hudson City
School District was classified as "high needs/rural" by the New York State Education Department; more than 50 percent of the 2,400 kids qualified for the federal free/reduced-price lunch program. At first we looked elsewhere for a school for our son, but the better private ones—where many of the town's tiny group of professional and upper-class parents sent their children—were pricey and an hour's drive away. After several weeks of canvassing the region, we found ourselves walking—this was a big plus—toward John L. Edwards Elementary School, just four blocks from our house. The school had 600 kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd graders—all of them adorable. How bad could it be? Besides, the principal, a middle-aged woman with a dour demeanor and a cluttered office, knew who E.D. Hirsch was.

The Responsive Classroom

It had become something of a ritual, like ordering fettuccine Alfredo at a new Italian restaurant as a test of the place's 
f
tier. "What do you think of E.D. Hirsch?" My wife was tired of the question, but I persisted in asking teachers and administrators as we visited potential schools for our son. Though Hirsch's Core Knowledge program had become one of the principal tributaries in the current of school reform, few of the educators we met in our school search had even heard of him, let alone read his 1987 bestseller, Cultural Literacy. I was so discouraged that by the time we got to Carol G., principal of Edwards Elementary, my question had been modified to, "Have you heard of E.D. Hirsch?" When she said Yes, I was ecstatic. We signed Dylan up, hopeful, or perhaps looking for an excuse not to put a six-year-old on a bus for 45 minutes every morning and afternoon.

All seemed well until, several weeks into the school year, I went to my first parents meeting. I found myself sitting in a circle of some 20 parents answering questions posed by a "facilitator" trained in something called "the responsive classroom." According to the sunny leader, the key to academic success was good social interaction; she talked about "shared feelings" instead of what Hirsch called "shared knowledge." Toward the end of the hour she asked the group, "And what do you want your child to know by the end of this school year?" Around the circle we went, each person saying that she (all of the other parents there were mothers) wanted her son or daughter to "be a better person" or to "get along with other children" or to "know right from wrong." This was "very good," said the facilitator, "very good." But I was perplexed. When my turn came, I said, "I would like my son to know the names of the countries of Africa." There was laughter. They thought I was joking.

In fact, the joke was on me. Public school, as I was soon to learn, was more sociological hothouse than academic incubator, choc-a-bloc with experiments in self-esteem and "skill sets" and dogma about when children were "ready to learn." For instance, the responsive classroom, though its developers claimed to care about academics, was all about "sharing, listening, inclusion and participation," about teaching the "skills needed to be a responsive member of a classroom and school." When I asked a teacher why 1st graders weren't learning any history, beyond holiday fare, she said, matter-of-factly, "I can't teach history. I'm too busy teaching children how to read."

"Why can't children learn the names of the planets in the solar system?" I asked Principal Carol.

"Because," she said, "they wouldn't know what it means. They can't grasp concepts like gravity and rotation on an axis."

I suddenly realized that I had failed to ask the sullen principal the follow-up question about Hirsch: what she thought of him. She told me now. "Oh him," she scoffed. "That rote memorization guy." My heart sank. It was not just an oversight that 1st graders would not learn the names of the countries of Africa or, for that matter, the names of the continents. It was planned. I started asking every teacher and administrator I met about curriculum and found a teacher corps almost universally scornful of content.

Running for Office

Strangely, I thought, there was no uproar about the school district's dismal academic record. But when I investigated, I found that it had been that way for years; evidently, everyone was used to being at the bottom of the academic barrel, numbed to low test scores and high failure rates—or had gotten used to the fact. According to one report, of the 676 school districts in the state outside of New York City, only 34 scored worse than Hudson on the statewide 4th-grade English language arts test. Even among the 160 high needs/rural districts, Hudson ranked 151st.

But while I saw the lives of children being wasted, the people who counted (the infamous "establishment") saw it as an extracurricular problem. At a PTA meeting, several mothers glared at me when I raised the question of the district's doing a better job. "Our schools have plenty of opportunities for kids," one scolded. "All you have to do is ask for them. It's here. If you're failing tests, it's not the district's problem."

It was then I decided that change could only come from the top: the school board.
My “Campaign for Kids”—there were three of us competing for two five-year slots on the board—consisted of a press release announcing my candidacy, a flyer (that I pinned up at supermarkets), and palm cards (handed out to anyone I met). My son Dylan, finishing 1st grade, drew evocative pictures to illustrate my ABC’s pledge of “Art, Beauty, and Community,” while my wife collected brochures for private schools—she thought I was crazy.

With 523 votes, I finished second and became an elected official, a member of the school board.

At first, I dismissed as unenlightened the warning of outgoing board member Pat Sullivan—“You can’t have an agenda in this job.” After all, what was wrong with wanting a challenging curriculum or administrative competence? But as I would later learn, it was not what you wanted, but how badly. The warning signs were all around, even at my very first board meeting—the “reorganizational” meeting, so called because it marked the official beginning of a school year (July 1), when the new budget clock began ticking.

There were 15 or so people in the audience of the small, windowless cafeteria of the high school. They applauded after Frank and I took our loyalty oaths. I felt the patriotic pulse, the line to Washington and Jefferson, in this democratic ritual, but the flash of nationalist pride was not quite bright enough to blind me to the fact that we were reorganizing almost nothing.

The items for board action, printed out in a 100-page spiral-bound agenda book, came fast and furious as Ed, the board president, went down the list, reading each item, waiting for a motion, then a second, then a vote. In quick succession, without comment or question, we approved the “official depositories” for the district’s monies (it was a $28 million budget), approved “single signature checks,” the “system of Treasurer’s Receipts,” “an annual audit,” a “system of borrowing to meet fiscal responsibilities.” Assured in advance that this was all pro-forma, and determined as I was to get off on a good start by being a team player, I voted Aye on everything. Twelve votes in just as many minutes and every one was Ayes-5 and Nays-0. (Two members of the board were missing on this memorable night.)

Then came the “appointments.” Substitute Teacher Caller. Substitute Teacher Aide Caller. Supervising Dentist. Asbestos Designee. Mileage Reimbursement Rate Delivery Service. Aye. Aye. Aye. We approved the Tax Warrant, the appointment of the high-school Weight Room Supervisor and the substitute Supervisor. We appointed 15 summer school aides. We voted to give the Superintendent of Building & Grounds a salary increase to $45,000 (from what I didn’t know and didn’t ask). Then we voted to give the Clerk, the Treasurer, the School Lunch Manager, the Transportation Coordinator, two school nurses, and the Abstinence Only Coordinator 4.5 percent salary increases. (I seconded that motion, having no idea who most of the people were, what they did, or what their previous pay was.) Ayes-5, Nays-0. We went through 25 votes in less than an hour, all of them unanimous.

We then voted to go into Executive Session and moved to an adjoining conference room to discuss “a contractual issue,” one of the few allowable reasons for excluding the public from deliberations (though I would soon learn that Executive Sessions were where most of the real business of the board got done). Tonight, I quickly learned, the issue was the superintendent’s contract. And we discussed it with him in the room. Well, “discuss” was not quite what happened. The contract was not even produced and, after a few softball questions, we agreed on a two-year extension, with a $3,000 increase to his $97,029 contract. Over a hundred grand. I was dumbfounded. How could anyone be making that much money overseeing a school district where a third of the 3rd graders couldn’t read?

By the time we emerged from Executive Session to vote on the contract “in public,” it was after ten o’clock and the public had gone home. Not surprisingly, since the two reporters had also left, there was no mention in the next day’s paper of the superintendent’s contract renewal. In fact, there never was.

Legalese

These first meetings dimmed any notion that I was joining a hallowed democratic institution—a forum for airing and discussing the community’s concerns. I had become a mere cog in a machine. Among the most oddly numbing of our tasks on the board was that of reading and approving policies. “We are taking policy action,” said the superintendent, Don C., a tall, affable Texan who favored starched shirts and took courses at Harvard. He could, as a veteran teacher friend of mine pointed out, “manage the board with the finesse of an expert magician.” Smiling, he announced the district’s need to establish rules on sexual harassment. I didn’t know it was a problem. But, said the Super, the Supreme Court had ruled on “peer sex harassment,” and we had “to take action.” And so, at one meeting, we were treated to the “first reading” on policies about “Sexual Harassment of Students,” “Sexual Harassment Formal Complaint Form,” “Sexual Harassment Appeal Form.” There was even—though this was obviously caused by a then bug-eyed typist—a “Sexual Harassment of Formal Com-
plaint Form,” which seemed an appropriate slip. “Mandates” and laws sprouted acres of explanatory weeds—most of them unnecessary. No one ever read the original “mandate.”

For instance, no one seemed to know why the “Parent/Family/Community Involvement Policy” was necessary, but it was assumed that it was required by some Oz-like authority, passed through the policy-writing machinery at some school board association office, and sent to us for our “approval.” I looked through three pages of well-intentioned euphemism—“Parent and family involvement is not a set of activities,” it read. “It is an individual and social process that empowers parents and students and builds their leadership skills in order for true partnerships to develop between homes and schools”—and wondered, Why? No one else on the board expressed any hint of having read it. And I was beginning to discern a pattern: the more written, the less understood.

Finally, sandwiched between the sex and the parental involvement, I noticed a “Code of Conduct for School Board Members.” This was intended, wrote the superintendent, in recommending the code, “to set standards for how the Board interacts with itself.” Sounded like sex to me. But the preoccupation with board member behavior was the result of the long-standing tension between the democracy represented by elected officials who oversaw the schools and the professionalism of those hired to run them. The superintendent was definitely attempting to tip the balance in favor of the pros. “We will not attempt to exercise individual authority over the district’s operations, staff, or personnel decisions,” read one of the rules he was proposing for us. Another: “We will not express individual judgments about the performance of the superintendent or staff. . . . We recognize the value of the chain of command. When approached by staff, constituents or the public, we will channel all inquiries to the administrator.” I e-mailed the superintendent, “Is this a joke?” He called and laughed lamely.

Jobs Program
For some reason the board was asked to vote on every individual hire, no matter how small. In one meeting, we approved a slew of appointments—a psychologist for $36,950, a social studies teacher for $30,791, a guidance counselor for $30,790—without discussion. At another we spent 30 minutes arguing about whether to raise the pay of the student lifeguards by ten cents an hour. It seemed that the prime function of the school system was to create jobs. Beyond all else, the school district was the area’s most proficient employment agency.

This became even more apparent to me when the district had two school principal vacancies to fill. I knew these positions could be key to serious curriculum change, and I e-mailed Don, “I am very excited about the possibility of personnel changes and would like to jump immediately into recruitment mode.” I suggested going “nationwide” with the search, and he encouraged my enthusiasms. But when I volunteered to put the word out, Ed, the board president, wrote back, “How about sending out the copy of our announcement? . . . It’s no telling where mail from you will travel and coming from a Board member I believe we should limit the editorializing of any positions we solicit for.” I laughed to myself. But then I got to the last sentence and wondered if it was time to cry. “We should let people know we are looking for quality, of course, but not to the point of advertising outside official channels.”

Then, I got my first taste of local politics, as I witnessed Ed and Don work the system so that we hired two local men, both of whom had been with the district for decades to dispose of many problem children with expensive babysitting.
(earning $80,000 a year—not bad in a county where you could pick up a nice four-bedroom house for the same amount). I now realized that this was going to be hard. Maybe nobody cared about curriculum, but they did care—a lot—about jobs.

Meanwhile, the board never reviewed other major expenditures, such as the installation of a new computer system. Another time, I asked the superintendent how a new asphalt parking lot was installed at the Greenport School without board approval—or even a bid or a notice or a need. He informed me that a bid wasn’t necessary for a job worth less than $10,000. And how much had this cost? About $9,950, he said with a straight face. I mentioned this to a local doctor, a Hudson native, and he laughed. “Around here you can buy someone with a $12 lunch.”

Not So Special Education

In another meeting, we approved a recommendation for a student to “attend programs for the 1999–2000 school year.” I looked at the accompanying form and saw that we were talking about student #058-99, a 12th grader born in 1981 who was classified as “learning disabled.” He/she would be assigned to a “resource room.” There were other abbreviations and codes—SP, PT, OT, SW, VI—and mention of “Counseling: 1x30,” but no clarification of what any of this meant—or cost. Don’t ask.”Mandated” was the knowing word from veteran board members.

In this sense, special education provided the best example of the democratic fiction that the school board had become. Despite the laudable goal of breaking down barriers to education for disabled children, in Hudson special ed had grown into a gurgling brook of angled execution and wasteful spending. Children were designated disabled by a District Committee on Special Education, a group of about a dozen social service and education professionals and some “ordinary” people chosen by the superintendent and the director of special education. It was up to the committee to determine the difference between disabled and nondisabled students and then make decisions about what kind of services disabled students needed.

When I saw the thick Annual Report about Hudson’s program, I gasped: almost 16 percent of the children in the school district were disabled, almost double the national average. But when I saw the distribution of the children among the 13 categories of disability, I got the picture. Of 394 disabled children, three were autistic, ten were mentally retarded, four were hard of hearing, two had traumatic brain injuries, ten were orthopedically impaired, and ten more were multiply disabled. The rest, more than 350, were either “emotionally disturbed,” “learning disabled,” or “speech impaired.” These were the kind of catchall categories that allowed a district to dispose of many problem children—in Hudson those children were mostly black—with expensive baby-sitting.

During a school tour the superintendent gave me in my second month on the board, he directed me into the library of Edwards Elementary and introduced me to a young teacher standing in front of an easel on which she had written “self esteem.” At her feet, sprawled on beanbag cushions, were four black children in special education, looking extremely bored. The teacher blinked a lot, smiled nervously, and kept urging the prone children to “sit up straight.” They giggled.

As we left the room, I turned to the superintendent, angry, and said, “I know those kids and they have more self-esteem in their little finger than . . . .”

He waved his hand. “We have a problem with that teacher,” he whispered. “That lady didn’t turn in grades for her class from last semester.” He paused. “We think she might have a drug problem. I had to transfer her to special ed.”

“Trouble with the teacher?” I almost shouted. Now, even more perturbed. “An adult with drug problems is teaching self-esteem?”

“Nothing we can do,” he said. “The union is grieving her transfer.”

It should have been the district’s motto: Nothing We Can Do.

In the Red

We were meeting in a small room of the high school, behind
the principal's office. I wasn't sure whether this was an "official" meeting, and thus "public," or an unofficial meeting—and thus illegal. Or both. We were being called together, said the board president, to go over the auditor's report for the year. He introduced Ray, a middle-aged man in a dark suit who handed out a three-page letter. Everyone read.

It didn't take long to figure out that something was wrong with the district's finances. We had a deficit—one that had grown from $468,919 to $749,434—reported Ray, caused by "unrealized state aid and overspending of the voter-approved budget." Not only that, he wrote, "It should be noted that there are no provisions in the law or regulations which permit a school district to have a deficit fund balance."

I was baffled by the apparent lack of urgency surrounding the news that the law didn't allow for deficit spending. After a few questions, Ray was thanked and dismissed. And before we adjourned, Ed reminded everyone about the state school board conference in Syracuse the following month. My mouth dropped. How could we trundle off to a weekend conference at taxpayer expense after just being told we had an illegal budget deficit? "It's already been paid for," said Ed.

My bafflement turned to horror over the next several months as I learned that the district had been running a deficit for several years. In fact, the state comptroller's office, which oversees the fiscal integrity of all state and local government agencies, had conducted its own audit and found the same thing: "overexpenditure of budgetary appropriations and the overestimation of revenues." Money was being moved around, from one fund to another, which was also against the rules, the comptroller noted. And when auditors had asked for records, they couldn't be found. Why hadn't this been a major scandal when the report had first been issued? Why hadn't heads rolled? I recall bringing the comptroller's audit to a PTA meeting, holding it up for all to see, and suggesting that many tens of thousands of dollars were being wasted while the money flowing through the veins of this tiny community was the same intricate one that inured it to academic failure.

The web of connections that kept the money flowing through the veins of this tiny community was the same intricate one that inured it to academic failure.

Instead of prompting discussion of the issues that made a charter viable—low test scores, high dropout rates, and a litany of woes that would mark the district as "failing"—the opposite happened. The teacher union president, normally a regular presence at school board meetings, stopped coming so that he wouldn't have to answer my questions about what was being done to improve things that his teachers controlled. (He had already stopped responding to my phone calls and letters.) He then wrote a letter to the newspaper in which he attacked the charter for "draining" resources from the public school, a clear message that the charter insurgents (mostly black) would take away jobs; fighting words, especially in this small, economically blighted community. I complained to Ed and Don about these tactics, but they shrugged and said, "Nothing we can do." I asked again that the charter school be put on our agenda. "Later," said Ed, obviously waiting for the jobs' threat poison to spread. When they did not respond to my request to write a letter to the editor (normally, a very big deal), I knew matters had become bareknuckled. And when my letter did appear, pointing out that the charter movement was what a failing public school system had created, Ed e-mailed me, calling me "a disgrace" and accusing me of "disrespect for staff (at all levels), administration, parents, and the general public."

I then realized that the debate was as much cultural—and racial—as educational, that the web of connections that kept the money flowing through the veins of this tiny community was the same intricate one that inured it to academic failure.

The worst of the politics was still to come, however, as the multiple dysfunctions seemed to coalesce around the question of charter schools. My attempts to get district personnel to see a charter school as a natural response to a troubled system were fruitless. Even after the letter from the state department of education informing us "that the Board of Regents has received an application for a charter school located within your school district boundaries," no one wanted to talk about it. They were going to take care of it the old-fashioned way: silence and intimidation.

On Valentine's Day, 2000, as my public battle in the paper percolated into board meetings, I walked into an Executive Session and was greeted with scowls from fellow board members. Jim the banker called me a "loose cannon"—and I took it as a compliment. But I knew it was time to throw in the towel. This would be a long war, and the school board was not where the biggest battles would be won or lost.

—Peter Meyer is a freelance journalist whose work has appeared in Harper's, Time, and Life magazines. He continues to be active in local school reform.