

# Pledge 'ban'

School district was put on hot seat post-9/11

By DOUG ERICKSON

**F**our weeks after terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center, a slight quorum of the Madison School Board met before a sparse crowd.

By evening's end, the members had infamously "banned" the Pledge of Allegiance, but at the time, the meeting went largely ignored by the community.

Within 12 hours, a quintessential Madison controversy had erupted.

Republican Gov. Scott McCallum called board members "oddballs." More than 20,000 e-mails — many of them venomous — poured into the district, a testament to the immediacy of the Internet and the burgeoning influence of right-wing radio talk shows.

At a specially called meeting one week later, an impromptu recitation of the pledge swept through the crowd of 1,200, followed by prolonged chants of "USA! USA! USA!" One of the 165 speakers referred to board members as "arrogant, elitist, heavy-handed, radical leftovers."

Police had an escape route mapped out for board members in case of violence.

"I think people in Madison are perfectly capable of having a thoughtful, deliberative debate about the purpose of the pledge and the purpose of public schools. But having that debate very quickly after Sept. 11 ensured that it would not be done in a way that could be reasonable," said Harry Brighthouse, a UW-Madison philosophy professor who studies patriotism.

Lost to history was much of the nuance. The board didn't pick the fight. It was responding to a new state law approved before Sept. 11, 2001, that



Craig Schreiner

Kelcey Swinger says the Pledge of Allegiance with his classmates at Black Hawk Middle School in October 2001.

required all Wisconsin public schools to offer the pledge or the National Anthem every school day.

Some Madison students and teachers had objected to the pledge's "one nation under God" line and to the militarism of the anthem's lyrics, particularly at a time when the U.S. government was formulating its response to 9/11.

Board member Bill Keys offered what he called a compromise: Only

instrumental versions of the anthem would be played to comply with the law.

Today, Keys says the board's decision served to question the rampant nationalism gripping the country — an unpopular stand during a time of bloodlust.

"We had the audacity to say, 'Relax. Back off. Let's get some perspective.' People bent on action don't want to hear a message of moderation, and they will kill the messenger."

The board, except for Keys, restored the pledge as an option in schools.

Keys, unrepentant to this day, easily withstood a recall attempt, became board president six months later and was re-elected to a second term with no opposition.

He has stacks of cards and letters from supporters.

The controversy fizzled as unexpectedly as it arose. ■



Joseph W. Jackson III

Bill Keys