

Webster schools scolded for pro-education signs

Placards placed outside polling places ahead of last year's budget vote

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State Commissioner of Education MaryEllen Elia has admonished the Webster Central School District over signs urging people to support public education that were placed outside schools and polling places in advance of last year's budget vote.

Longtime Webster resident and district fiscal watchdog Robert Herloski filed an appeal with the commissioner last June arguing that the district tried to improperly sway public opinion in support of the school budget by posting signs reading "Supporting Our Public Schools" and "ACT for Education" alongside district signs advertising the May 16 budget vote.

The signs came from the Monroe County Superintendents' Public Education Advocacy Committee's "A Community Together for Education" initiative.

"When schools are putting out their budgets, all associated information should be strictly factual," said Herloski. "They need to stay away from language that sways opinion, and the signs are improper."

Herloski's overall appeal was dismissed, as was his request that the 2017 budget vote be voided. Nonetheless, in a decision on March 30 Commissioner MaryEllen Elia said Webster officials "did not take sufficient steps to avoid the appearance of partisan impropriety" by displaying the signs outside schools and the district's sole polling place at Webster Schroeder High School in the weeks before the budget vote, and then removing the signs the day after the vote was held.

Additionally, she said, the district seemingly made a tacit endorsement of the signs, which were "innocuous in and of themselves" by coordinating distribution of the signs through district offices.

"I admonish (the district) to ensure that, should it choose to display the ACT4ED signs in the future, the signs are displayed in a time and manner that does not suggest improper advocacy for the school budget."

Webster officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Under state law, school districts are prohibited from exhorting voters to approve their spending plans.

Herloski, an optics engineer at Xerox Corp., is a 30-year Webster resident. The sign issue was the third time he has filed an appeal with the commissioner over a matter related to school budgets. His previous two appeals were over parent-teacher association documents that advocated for a "yes" vote on a budget and whether or not the district provided enough financial information on certain public budget documents. The PTSA appeal was dismissed and the budget document appeal was partly upheld.

Herloski said he just wants to ensure that the district complies with the law and presents a fair and accurate picture of its spending plan without trying to gather public support.

"School districts certainly have a lot of built-in support for their budgets," he said. "And they need to put their budget up for a vote, let the facts speak for themselves and let the voters decide."

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Signs outside State Road Elementary School in Webster. PROVIDED PHOTO

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