

Reopening and racism top school board election talk

Some warn kids being indoctrinated with anti-white propaganda

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The two hot-button issues in education over the last year have inevitably found their way into school board politics, with spirited debates over racism and the reopening of schools taking place in several Monroe County districts ahead of the May 18 election.

As local suburban schools make halting progress toward anti-racist curriculum and policies, a number of candidates have emerged to hurry them along. In some cases, they are running against opposing candidates who warn that children are being indoctrinated with anti-white propaganda and demand that politics be kept out of schools.

At the same time, parents who organized around the question of reopening schools in 2020 during the coronavirus

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School

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pandemic have channeled their energy into politics, with several people running near single-issue campaigns on making school look like normal again.

I’ve seen for the most part, the vast majority of families and educators are engaged with this work because they know it’s important for all their kids.” That assertion was fiercely contested at the Fairport candidate forum, in particular by fellow candidates Nathanael Brown and Donald Kords (Kords dropped out of the race May 12). Both men repeatedly attacked critical race theory, an academic discipline that has become a favorite target on the right. Broadly speaking, critical race theory posits that racism is more complex than just interpersonal bigotry. Rather, it exists within large systems — the education system, for instance — and

The issues are perhaps the most vivid in Fairport, where two teachers union-endorsed candidates have come out strongly in favor of the district's anti-racist efforts while two others were motivated to run by what they described as dangerous neo-Marxist curriculum, as well as the need to reopen schools fully.

The same issues exist to some degree in all 18 Rochester-area suburban school districts (the Rochester City School District holds its school board election in November, not May). There are 84 candidates for 43 openings in all those districts put together, with contested races in 16 of them.

Running on reopening schools

Since New York schools were closed in March 2020, grassroots parents groups have sprouted across the state demanding an accelerated return to in-person, unmasked education.

Nicole Sidhu helped organize such a group in Rochester, called Open Schools Monroe County. She now is running for school board in Pittsford. "Running for office was pretty well the last thing I would've said I'd do at this time last year," she said. "But I just became so concerned with the behavior of our school board and the lack of advocacy for our children."

School boards do not have the authority to open or close schools on their own, but Sidhu and others said they would use their platform as elected officials to advocate for reopening.

"We must advocate now at the highest level of state leadership and help move the needle forward to get our 6-12 students back full-time in the classroom," said Susan Kavanagh, one of nine candidates for three spots on the Penfield school board. "Waiting or guidance will not get us there; as leaders, we must be proactive." Many school districts have already returned to five days a week of inperson learning or have announced they will do so in the fall. Sidhu, though, said it would be a mistake to place trust in that hope. "The pandemic is not something that's just going to disappear come June," she said. "We are likely to have a surge again in the fall. ... If the cases surge beyond the state's state red zone, what will happen?" Stacy Schell, a candidate in Fairport, said she would oppose mandatory vaccinations in K-12 schools — no such mandate

must be addressed head-on. Kords called that "a nightmare ... being funded by our taxpayer dollars," and asked: "Do you want to raise a generation of radicals?" He said repeatedly that politics has no place in schools but bent his own rule to endorse some unspecified retaliation against China regarding COVID-19. "This disease came from China. It was manufactured and allowed to be spread. That root cause needs to be dealt with," Kords said. "This (disease) is not that serious, quite frankly, but there are a lot of other things that could be much worse." Listening to Kords and Brown speak, and to the people cheering them in the audience, was too much for Tiffany Porter, a Fairport resident and founder of the group Black in the 'Burbs. "I had to leave early; my blood pressure was getting too high," she said. "The rhetoric of all these folks is basically the same: They take the right-wing propaganda and regurgitate it. ... These people can cause direct harm to kids of color, LGBTQ kids — everyone who needs to be learning to be anti-racist."

By contrast, Brown was energized after the forum. He said his answering machine was flooded after it ended from callers requesting a yard sign. "It's been mostly overwhelming support," he said. In Brockport, firsttime political candidate Hui Tang is running on a pledge to boost diversity in the district and address the "obvious and statistically significant gaps" in achievement among different demographic groups.

Tang is currently on the defensive, though, regarding social media posts from 2020 that used explicit anti-police language and calls to defund the police. Tang's lone opponent in the race, incumbent Daniel Legault, is a career police officer.

School board elections in New York state will take place May 18.

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exists — and derided teachers who supported a slower path to reopening.

“If teachers are so scared to come back to school, maybe (they) should find another profession,” she said. Candidates are running on similar platforms in Penfield and Spencerport as well, among other districts.

Anti-racism efforts

People in districts across Monroe County have taken up the cause of advancing anti-racism work in suburban schools, and several of them are running for school board. Among other things, this year’s field of candidates is one of the most diverse ever.

Among them is Mary Caitlin Wight, an education professor who is running for a position in Fairport.

“When it comes to race and equity, there can’t be any ambiguity on antiracism,” she said. “From what



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