

Clashes common at suburban school boards

Series of incidents reflects national pattern of rising frustration

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Community members protesting mask requirements and anti-racist curriculum have disrupted school board meetings in several Monroe County districts in the last month, including an incident Tuesday in Penfield where the meeting room had to be cleared.

The series of incidents reflects a national pattern of rising frustration among some parents at schools' halting return to non-pandemic conditions as well as a move to implement, at least in theory, anti-racist principles.

In the Penfield incident, several speakers in the public forum had railed against the district's continuing insistence on mask-wearing and also its use of anti-racist curriculum.

In that instance a parent, Rich Tyson, said he noticed school board member William Yaeger mimicking a speaker. He yelled to him from the audience, telling him to stop being disrespectful.

Yaeger, who lost in his re-election campaign last month and was participating in his final board meeting, cursed at Tyson from the stage and appeared to gesture to him to approach. Tyson did so, setting off general chaos that served to clear the room until the meeting resumed in a virtual-only forum.

Yaeger declined to comment. In a statement, Board President Mark Elledge said Yaeger's behavior was "completely inappropriate."

The Penfield meeting was notable in that it was a board member escalated the situation. But meetings in Fairport, Greece, Pittsford and Webster in the last two months also have been disrupted, and in some cases forced to adjourn, because of attendees shouting, interrupting or refusing to wear masks.

instance, a local man encouraged thousands of people watching his Facebook live-stream in late May to storm school buildings and physically take the masks off children's faces.

Tyson, from the Penfield meeting, said the pandemic has made many parents more aware of how school districts operate — and they don't like what they see. "It just woke us up to how decisions are made at a local level, and how many are not made at a local level," Tyson said. "Everything you say something, it's, 'We'd love to do that, but Albany, but Albany, but Albany....'" School boards then make the situation worse, he said, but failing to engage with parents at meetings.

"You speak to the board, then don't say anything, they do their thing and they get out," he said. "They should be thrilled that parents are coming out to engage with their children's education. ... I think a lot of parents are feeling disrespected and bullied."

Sherry Johnston also said the state is partially to blame for its erratic, lastminute messaging around school reopening. "When guidance changes on a Friday and the expectations are to be implemented on a Monday, that's just not enough time to communicate to the entire community — especially if you yourself don't have clear guidance," she said. "There's this perfect storm of timing and misinformation."

The situation is not unique to the Rochester area. The New York State School Boards Association last month presented a seminar for its members about "defeating uncivil discourse," a spokesman said.

Candidates who ran on platforms tied to the frustration over the pace of school reopening were mostly unsuccessful in the May elections, including in Penfield and Webster, and the issue of COVID-related measures will likely be moot by September as infections continue to decline. Still, neither Johnston nor Tyson expects tension to lessen anytime soon.

"Parents are feeling organized, energized and very motivated to take ownership of their districts," Tyson said. "School boards are going to see some big changes coming soon."

Those attendees are protesting face masks and also “critical race theory,” an academic term that has gained traction among conservatives and encompasses most of what local districts hope to accomplish through their anti-racist curriculum initiatives.

The same topics were key issues in the school board elections last month.

“There is a lot of anger and angst out there about a lot of things and it’s being funneled to the school board table,” said Sherry Johnston, executive director of the Monroe County School Boards Association.

“There’s just this disconnect by a small group of people wanting to express themselves in a way that’s gotten frightening to our board members. ... It’s just reached this fever pitch.”

Parents feeling disrespected

The majority of speakers at meetings have been civil, if passionate, but some have run to extremes or encouraged violent behavior. In a recent

Penfield and other school districts said they are reviewing their school board meeting policies to promote civility and ensure safety as well as possible.

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