

Smith Mountain Eagle
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News: BCPS Confederate

Public urges BCPS to ban Confederate flag

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In response to an incident that occurred at Jefferson Forest High School earlier this month, a large crowd filled the conference room at the Bedford County School Board's regular meeting Thursday night.

Eight concerned parents or staff members spoke to the board against the groups of students at Jefferson Forest who posed for a photograph with the Confederate flag during the week of Feb. 4. This photograph was then widely shared through a variety of social media platforms and sparked a significant conversation about the Bedford County code of student conduct.

"It's been a boiling infuriation to have a child who is doing very well in school, come home on several occasions and tell me that they've been the victim of derogatory racist in a classroom and in hallways," Bedford County resident and parent Lyman Connor said. "We came to the commencement of spirit week and the commencement of Black History Month, and how is that kicked off? It's kicked off by me getting images at nine o'clock at night, saying 'look at what's going around the school.' I was absolutely infuriated."

According to the speakers at the meeting, in addition to the incident, which occurred earlier this month, there are students at Jefferson Forest who regularly wear clothing that displays the Confederate flag. One parent said her kids told her that's just a regular thing there and that they were used to it.

"The students in that photograph did not break any rules," Jefferson Forest teacher Spence White said. "That is precisely the problem. The fact that kids would think these photos were a good idea in 2019 during Black History Month is a predictable result of the BCPS policy of students being permitted to display Confederate flags in schools."

In the concerns that were voiced to the school board that evening, the message was clear. The public is urging Bedford County Public Schools to change the dress code, so that Confederate flags and other symbols that people consider to be offensive, are banned from being displayed in school in any way, shape, or form.

"I suspect that many would justify the dress code restrictions by maintaining that a girl in a tank top for example, is too much of a distraction for a boy," White said. "Well how distracting is sitting next a Confederate flag for a black student?"

Bedford County School Superintendent Doug Schuch, stated that he would like to use this incident as an opportunity to examine the practices of BCPS.

"Maybe we're challenging some of the issues in our community, which spills over into our schools," Schuch said. "Young people don't typically just come straight out of a womb with certain attitudes and dispositions. They learn them."

One of the approaches is labeling the Confederate flag as a distraction to the learning process of other students.

"Whether or not we agree or disagree of what the image of the Confederate flag means for people and whether or not we can say definitively what it means in somebody's heart when they see that image or when they display that image, there does seem to be a general consensus that banning it would probably be a good idea simply because of the distractions that it can cause for the learning process," Schuch said. "We're a learning organization and that's what we're all about."

Schuch, as well as other board members, suggested looking into this incident further and getting more information from the community. The idea of holding community meetings about this issue was suggested before proposing the motion to change the dress code for Bedford County Schools, so students will no longer be allowed to display the Confederate flag or other symbols that could be considered offensive.

"I want to make sure we listen to different opinions," Schuch said. "I also want to make sure that if we do that, that we think it will make things better. I can't say that it will or it won't."

At the beginning of the meeting, the board also heard updates on the Roanoke Valley Governor's School, student hunger, the Forest Middle School expansion project, the kindergarten readiness action plan and the student wellness action plan.

In regards to student hunger, the board is considering taking steps to prevent 'lunch shaming,' or, taking away food from a student who can't afford it.

At Forest Middle School, the expansion project is underway to take steps towards making the school safer and preventing an intruder from being able to enter the building.

The board also heard a comprehensive annual financial report and discussed amending the school calendar so that students would not have to go to school on March 3, 2020, because of the schools that will serve as polling sites for the 2020 presidential primary.

The board also approved a series of bills for Feb. 21, the expenditure report for Feb. 12, the revenue report for Jan. 31 and the payroll certification for Dec. 31. In other business matters, the board approved the use of general obligation bonds in spring, 2019 for renovations at Forest Middle School; authorizing a re-appropriation of \$662,745.86 to the maintenance fund and \$662,754.86 to the self-funded health fund and nominating the Bedford Training School and Susan G. Gibson High School for the National Register of Historic Places.

The last matter the board approved was the adoption of the preliminary budget for 2020. The budget for next year includes a five percent cost of living salary adjustment for all scales and positions, increases the stipend to \$4,000 per year for hard to fill teachers (the stipend is currently \$3,000) and a 2.25 percent increase for health and dental insurance 80 percent of which is paid for by the board and 20 percent is paid for by employees.

The board approved the adoption of the preliminary budget, which will now go to the Bedford County Board of Supervisors to be reviewed. In approving this, the special called budget meeting Feb. 26 has now been canceled.

"This budget is very closely aligned to our Bedford County Schools Strategic plan," Schuch said. "It's more closely aligned in fact, than any budget I've proposed in the past 10 years."

The school board will hold its next regular meeting on Thursday, March 14, beginning at 5 p.m.

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7/17/2019

News: Bedford School Board 7-11

Bedford parents react to KKK gathering

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On July 6, a group of white supremacists in Hanover gathered outside the county courthouse with signs and attire supporting the Ku Klux Klan in a rally. They also, in doing so, waved Confederate flags.

On Thursday, at the Bedford School Board's July 11 regular meeting, citizen and parent Jessica Taylor voiced her concerns about this rally and compared to the incident at Jefferson Forest High School involving the Confederate flag earlier this year in a continued effort by Bedford parents to have the flag permanently banned from being worn or displayed in Bedford schools.

"I thought to myself, in 2019, we have people waving Confederate flags by courthouses," Taylor said. "Then I thought to myself, when is our county going to step forward, make a difference and set a standard."

Since the incident at Jefferson Forest, numerous parents, faculty and staff have addressed the school board at its regular meetings during the year, pushing for the flag to be banned.

"Recently there have been investigations and grievances that have been filed that come back and show no correlation and no racism," Taylor said. "What needs to happen?"

Taylor indicated that she was told that many wealthy donors of Jefferson Forest had children who were involved in the Confederate flag incident.

"What that said to me was that it's not worth it to protect our children," Taylor said. "I insist that we ban the Confederate flag in Bedford County Public Schools, its images and its likenesses."

Bedford parent Miranda Ray also addressed the board, saying that she has two teenaged children who will be attending school at Jefferson Forest when school begins this year Aug. 14.

"I'm excited to see my children move on to their next level of education," Ray said. "However, there is a part of me that worries about my children's safety and their protection while they're attending school."

Ray said that she received a text message from her son when the incident at Jefferson Forest occurred about how he was uncomfortable, distracted and upset.

"He couldn't believe what he was seeing right before his eyes in that lobby," Ray said. "He was shocked that it wasn't stopped immediately and that these kids have a sense of hatred towards us and I don't understand that."

In business matters, the board continued its discussion on the Forest Middle School expansion project; heard an update on an elementary facilities study and heard an update on the Broadband action plan and discussed the 2020-2021 calendar.

Also, the board approved a series of bills for July 11; year-to-date expenditure and revenue reports for June 30; payroll certification for May 31; policy reviews for June; increasing the minimum physical activity requirement for students to 150 minutes per week; nutrition bid approvals; \$220,000 for the lease purchase of 14 school buses; School Superintendent Doug Schuch's designees for 2019-2020; and recognizing board Chairwoman Julie Bennington as the Virginia School Board Association Regional School Board Member of the Year.

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11/13/2019
News: F.C. School Board 11-11

Dress code, free speech rights discussed

PETER MASON
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The Franklin County School Board discussed two areas concerning the policies of Franklin County Public Schools on Monday night at its Nov. 11 regular meeting.

One of these policies was an update on the dress code, which was tabled until next month so the board could gather more information on whether or not students in Franklin County wearing or displaying the Confederate flag could create any major disruptions in the school system.

School board member Penny Blue stated that she believed the flag being worn or displayed in schools could be a major disruption to students who find it offensive because of what it represents.

“That flag represents white supremacy and people saying that they have a right to own other people,” Blue said. “When I read that ‘clothing may not depict discriminatory,’ that to me is discriminatory.”

Blue used history as an example, explaining why the Civil War was fought, and that while some people claim it wasn’t fought over slavery, the original documents of why the Confederate states seceded from the Union was because of their rights to own slaves. She also explained how disruptions can take place in a learning environment.

“I don’t think that there has to be a physical fight to disrupt my learning environment,” Blue said. “I truly believe that flag does in fact disrupt the learning environment.”

Blue talked about some of her visits to history museums in the past, one of which was when she saw a KKK suit at one of these museums and she reflected on the fear that African Americans once felt during the Civil Rights movement.

The board discussed various ways to adjust the policy to prevent students from being able to wear the flag in school. Board member Donna Cosmato stated that while she supported a ban on the flag as a citizen, she had to protect the right to free speech as a member of the school board.

“I have to uphold the law and I have to uphold the Constitution,” Cosmato said. “There are things that I think are hateful, but I have to allow people to say it. In our America, that’s one of the freedoms that we have that we hold precious.”

The board tabled voting on the dress code policy until next month.

The board also approved a policy regarding school meal prices, particularly concerning students who may have trouble paying for food provided by the school. The board discussed how to address an issue with a student not having the money to pay for a meal without embarrassing them while they are in line waiting on food.

Instead, they would be given their food, and the matter would later be brought up with that child’s parents. The board made some adjustments to policy but approved it.

In other matters, the board approved accounts and payrolls; appointments and resignations of instructional and operational staff; the enhanced DSIP program for the 2020-21 school year; granting permission for homeschooling or religious exemption of homeschoolers; fundraising activities; and educational trips and activities.

The school board will hold its next regular meeting Dec. 9.