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ALERT **FEATURED** **TOP STORY**

Central Virginia Places

Smith Mountain Lake Christian Academy enjoying new high school facility

Justin Faulconer

Oct 17, 2023



The breezeway at Smith Mountain Lake Christian Academy on Thursday, Oct. 5, 2023.

Paige Dinger, The News & Advance

Justin Faulconer



On a recent fall morning, the scenic view of fields, trees and mountains filled the backdrop of the Smith Mountain Lake Christian Academy's Moneta campus like a postcard.

Lincoln Bryan, the academy's administrator, is just as enchanted about what's happening inside its four buildings that in recent years has seen a surge in enrollment growth.

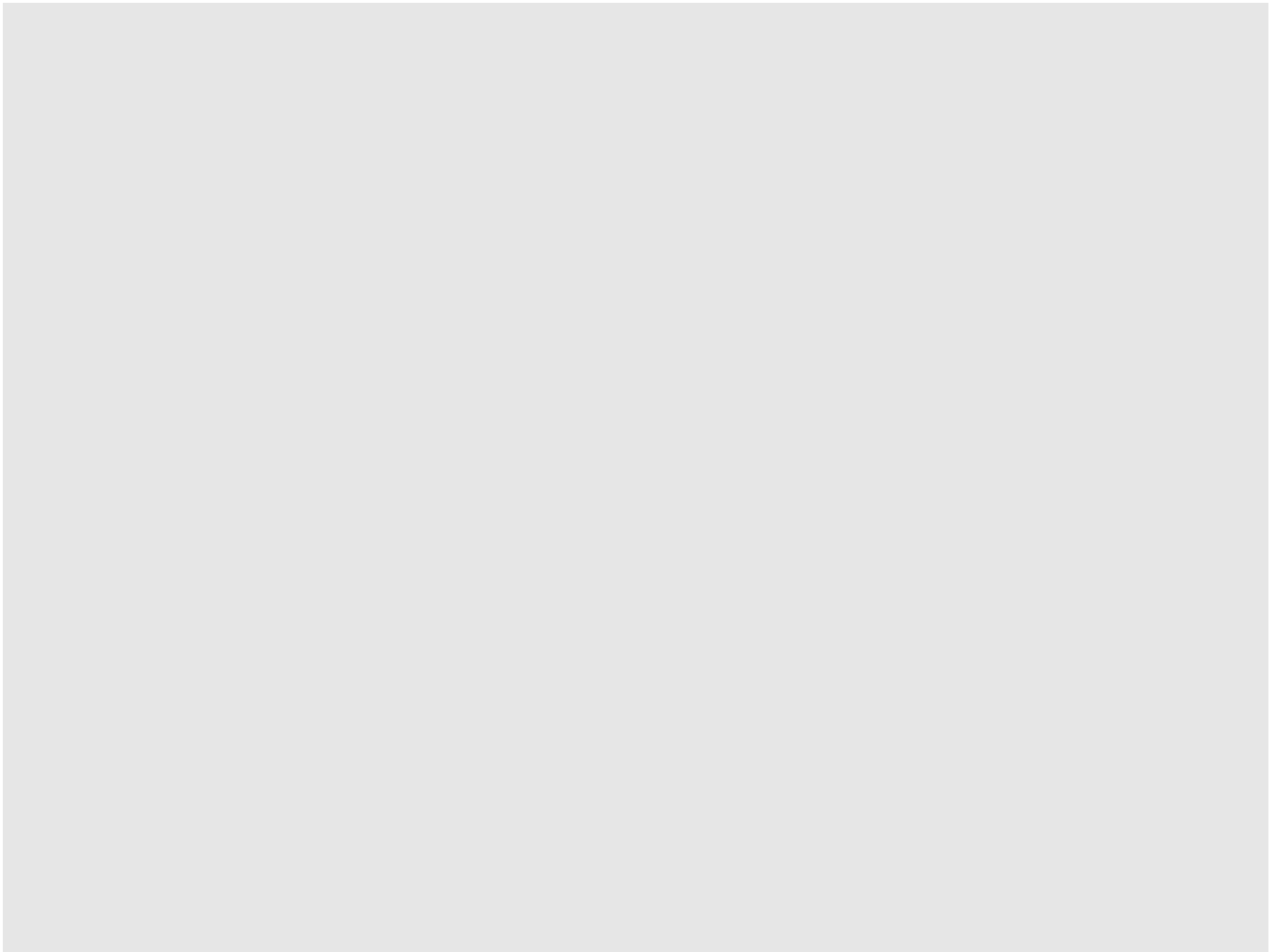
"I tell people all the time, our best look is looking in, because we've got amazing teachers, we've got phenomenal students, great parents, so that's cool," Bryan said of the views. "But inside is even cooler."

The “inside” became even stronger this school year as SMLCA opened a new 26,000-square-foot high school facility at 1203 Timberwood Lane in Moneta. The new \$5 million-plus high school campus, which is connected to the main church facility of EastLake Community Church (ELCC), features 13 classrooms and a 300-seat cafeteria and conference room.

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The new three-story building is an educational and conference center for the church that is in its ninth year of leadership of SMLCA and has classrooms equipped with state-of-the-art technology, a number of science and computer labs and eight offices.



A classroom at Smith Mountain Lake Christian Academy on Thursday, Oct. 5, 2023.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

The academy has three other campuses within close vicinity on Hendricks Store Road that includes an elementary school in the former Sunset Cay development property, which was purchased and remodeled four years ago; a junior high campus that formerly served as ELCC's main sanctuary and the Lil Ospreys campus next to it.

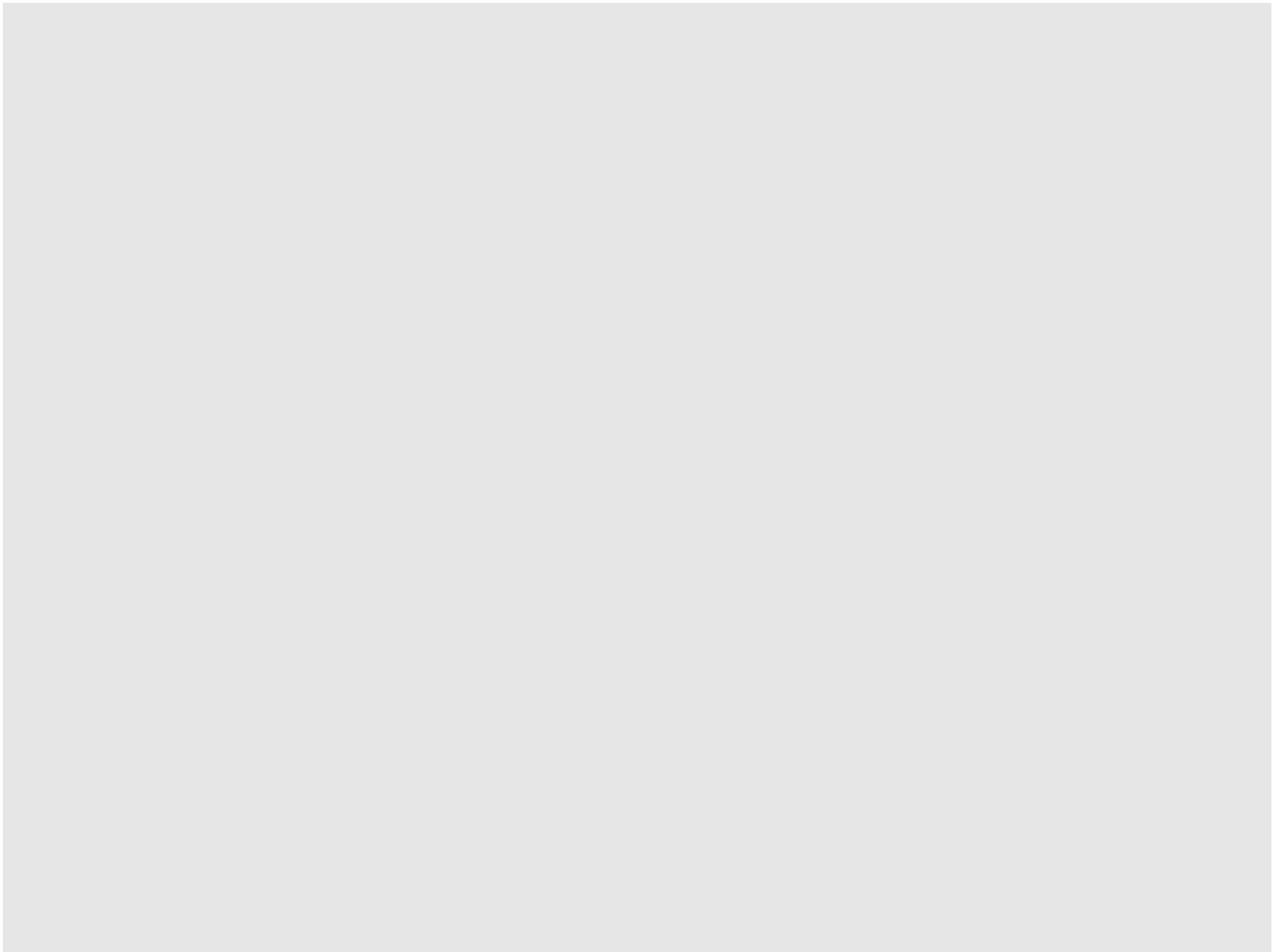
Another building in the works on the high school campus next to the football field will include a concession stand with restrooms, a maintenance building, a vocational trade center and a weight room. The academy's mascot is the Osprey, a type of bird that is popular in the lake area, and it refers to itself as "Osprey Nation."

Bryan said the SMLCA started 15 years ago as a community effort by local church and business leaders who felt like there was a need for Christian-based education in the lake area. For a seven-year period, that group ran it and in 2015, EastLake stepped in

to take over in a transition process that was amicable, according to Bryan.

In 2014, Bryan was part of the transitional board and at the time teaching at a Christian school in Roanoke as well as serving as youth pastor at ELCC. He recalls starting the year in January 2015 under the church's leadership with close to 90 students, up about 20 to 30 from previous year averages, and the numbers kept going up year after year.

In ELCC's ninth year at the helm, the academy has 545 students between the four campuses, he said.



A cross is seen in the distance out a window at Smith Mountain Lake Christian Academy on Thursday, Oct. 5, 2023.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

“That’s more people we get a chance to influence, more people we get a chance to connect with,” Bryan said. “We just over time have become a viable option for people seeking education with a different flavor maybe than the local public schools.”

EastLake started in 2006 as a church plant from Roanoke with about 130 people on a normal basis and it has also seen incredible growth, Bryan said. The church in its current location that opened “in the teeth of COVID” draws about 1,400 people per Sunday, he said.

SMLCA serves infants from eight weeks old to high school graduates with associate’s degrees, he said.

“And anticipating future growth, this building will house as many as 300 high school students, and we are at 145 today, so it gives a couple of years to grow and impact more people,” Bryan said of the new high school facility. “It’s a blessing.”

He said people have moved to the Moneta area from Alaska, California, New York and Pennsylvania just so their kids can attend SMLCA.

“I just think if you do something well and you do it consistently, it grows,” Bryant said. “It’s quite a ways to another Christian school so from a geographical perspective we have a little bit of a niche, so there’s that element.”

The school brings in students from four counties, the greatest bulk from Bedford and Franklin counties, while Roanoke and Campbell counties also are included.

He said the new facility is a game-changer after years of “stepping over each other” in other facilities, explaining that last year the high school had seven classrooms and had to share space with elementary students. Now the classrooms are double and the high school is well-positioned to keep growing, he said.



Smith Mountain Lake Christian Academy on Thursday, Oct. 5, 2023.

Paige Dinger photos, The News & Advance

The academy has 75 staff currently and that number also is expected to grow as each year the level of talented educators looking for jobs increases, he said. SMLCA has eight 45-minute classes a day and does not have a “cookie cutter” approach to education, he said.

Academics, athletics, the arts and vocational training all matter and are part of the curriculum, he said.

“We try to match what God has given, the gifts and talents of each one of our students, we try to find out what that is and put them on a path to success,” Bryant said. “We’re the only Christian school I know of who has their own chapter of the

Future Farmers of America. So we're just trying to put in front of kids a chance to succeed in whatever avenue, however God has gifted them. That's one of the reasons I think we're growing and the niche I think we fill."

Becky Fogarty, office manager at SMLCA who commutes about 13 minutes from her home in Moneta, has worked there three years and loves that educators are allowed to minister the Gospel to students every day.

"They need a positive environment and God should come first in everybody's life and that's what we give them," Fogarty said. "I love coming to work every day. I love who I come to work for and who I come to work with."

She said every morning she gets on campus with the sun coming up is beautiful.

"You may see me taking a picture of the cross back there in the mountains," Fogarty said with a smile. "It's very scenic and it makes you realize what a great place and what God has given you to work with every day."

Bryan said class sizes are capped at 20 students for most grades and will stay that way even as the academy grows.

"We're not here to make money, we are here to educate kids," he said. "That's the focal point."

Kindergarten is at 15 students per teacher and first grade is 18 students per teacher, he said.

"We're about the kids. We say all the time 'it's people over policy,'" Bryan said. "We need policy but we also want to be people-friendly and I think we have accomplished that."



The gym at Smith Mountain Lake Christian Academy on Thursday, Oct. 5, 2023.

Paige Dinger photos, The News & Advance

For families interested in considering SMLCA as an option for their children, he said: “There’s literally no avenue for success in pleasing God or pleasing your plan for them that we won’t try to help you accomplish.”

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By Justin Faulconer

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/education/a-great-day-for-amherst-high-school-expansion-project-breaks-ground/article_45dba960-5f03-11ee-9342-176238d119ec.html

TOP STORY

'A great day for Amherst:' High school expansion project breaks ground

Justin Faulconer

Sep 30, 2023



Amherst County school leaders and county officials dig for the groundbreaking for Amherst County High School expansion project
Paige Dingler, The New Era-Progress

Justin Faulconer



The stage is set for Amherst County High School’s new addition and renovation to move forward as school and county officials celebrated the \$32 million project’s groundbreaking Friday.

“It’s a great day for Amherst County Public Schools and Amherst County,” Superintendent William Wells said.

The school division is marking a major milestone with the addition and renovation that Wells said is much needed and a “dramatic improvement” to the high school facility. He thanked the Amherst County Board of Supervisors for recently agreeing to bridge a \$14 million funding gap, which he said was crucial to making the dream a reality.

“This addition and renovation is not just for our students but it’s for the entire Amherst County community,” Wells said. “Amherst County High School has always been a focal and meeting point for our community and we want that legacy to continue by partnering with our community and welcoming them into the school ... This will be a great space and we’re excited to see the work get underway.”

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Wells said the project is expected to be completed in about two years. The work includes a new 1,400-seat auditorium and fine arts classroom for band, chorus and theater — a feature of the project school leaders and staff have said is many years overdue and a much-welcomed upgrade.

The groundbreaking ceremony was held just outside the school's main gym where the new auditorium will be located. Other work includes a new kitchen and dining commons area, and renovations to the existing cafeteria, the current auditorium that will become a new nursing lab, three classrooms and an office; the current band and chorus lab will be converted into a cosmetology lab, the welding lab will be expanded and the culinary arts lab will be upgraded.

A new agricultural sciences lab focusing on horticulture and hydroponics and a field house for the softball and baseball programs also will be constructed.

Chris Terry, the county school board's chair, recalled visiting the current auditorium for the first time as an elementary school student in Amherst during the mid-1970s. He said as big a deal as that was at the time, the renovated facility will put the high school on par with other divisions in the area.

"... We're going to get some of those same facilities that other places have had for decades," Terry said. "This is going to be a great addition to our school, our community."

He said the upgrades will improve the school's capabilities and make it more welcoming. The field house and its restrooms and concessions also are a major improvement, he said, and he thanked the county for its financial support.

"Our board of supervisors stepped up and did what the community needed to get this done," Terry said.

County Administrator Jeremy Bryant said the much-needed project is personal for him because he has a son in school and two more children who will do so in the future all as fifth-generation students in his family. Bryant graduated from the school in 1997 and said his father, the third generation in his family, also graduated from ACHS.

"And I expect I'm one of many generations of folks and families who have been through this school," Bryant said. "This project is an investment towards the future for upcoming generations. This space will provide an outlet for learning, development and expanding the capacity of young minds. I'm honored to be and proud to be a smart part of this project and I look forward to seeing how it will positively affect our students and our community."

During the ceremony Wells recognized the recent death of John Andrew Fister, who taught German language and math at the high school. Many high school students and staff attended his funeral Friday, Wells said.

"Mr. Fister was a great teacher and was just well respected by the students and staff and he will be dearly missed," Wells said. "I will say he was the educator we should all strive to be. He was just a great person."

Tom Martin, chair of the board of supervisors, said at times county and school division officials didn't know if the project would get done because of funding issues.

The board of supervisors earlier in this month passed a 2% increase to the county meals tax that will go toward paying off the debt service on the building and other capital improvement projects for the county.

“When it boils down to it is really about the vision that we have for the future of our children,” Martin said.

Martin said he has a child currently at the high school and spoke of the expansion’s overall importance to Amherst County.

“I’ve said it many times but when we leave this Earth the only true legacy that we are leaving is our children,” Martin said. “And I think the investments we are making today with help us do a good job with that.”

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By Justin Falconer

ALERT TOP STORY

Amherst schools' opt-in policy draws more backlash

Justin Faulconer

Feb 10, 2023



AMHERST — The majority of a dozen speakers who addressed the Amherst County School Board Thursday asked the board to reverse a recently adopted opt-in policy for sexually explicit materials in schools.

The opt-in policy was an additional measure apart from a model policy a committee appointed by the board recommended. Board members said in December when it passed the intent is making sure parents are aware of sexually explicit material in the classroom and they can opt in their child with a written form, bringing more parental involvement in the process than an opt-out measure would allow.

In the board's two most recent meetings several educators are pushing back against that stance, stating the additional measure is counter-productive. Board member John Grieser, who was absent from the December vote to pass the opt-in measure, said he is against it because he feels it sends a wrong message of distrust to teachers.

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Kathleen Ayau, chair of the English department at Amherst County High School, said she knows the board and Amherst County Public Schools educators want high-quality, challenging and safe education for the students.

During the public comments session of the board's Thursday meeting, she urged the board to remove the opt-in measure in favor of an opt-out policy, which she feels better addresses the needs of students, parents and teachers, is easier to handle and is more inclusive.

Ayau said collecting forms for opt-in is difficult and she believes the definition of sexually explicit content is ambiguous.

"If we are not getting the forms back, we have to develop alternative resources and prepare dual lessons, which can be quite burdensome and potentially expensive for teachers to handle," Ayau said.

Ayau also spoke on the topic of "indoctrination" in schools, a term she feels is being used too loosely and incorrectly and is not happening in the county's schools. Libraries are places of culture, learning and ideas, Ayau said, adding she is not

convinced recent scrutiny of library titles is truly representative of the will of the county.

“Those of us who want our students to have access to a wide variety of sources and to have the freedom to check out books of their choosing, I would just encourage to please speak up and make your wishes known to the county,” Ayau said, adding to the board: “Have respect for our librarians and the policies we have in place.”

Kate McPhatter, an Amherst County Public Schools parent, said she is greatly concerned by what appears to be an attack on literature in the county schools. The opt-in is a concern to her, as she feels it creates an enormous workload for teachers and looks much like mismanagement. She asked what is wrong with allowing trained professionals to choose materials for their classrooms without the extra scrutiny.

“As a parent, I am much more concerned with what my children see on a screen than what they read in a book,” McPhatter said. “At least with a book, they have to use their imagination.”

McPhatter said she feels taking away teachers’ autonomy in the classroom will lead to losing high-quality educators. Like other speakers, she mentioned the Lynchburg City School Board’s recent decision to stay with an opt-out policy rather than change to opt-in and urged the Amherst board to do the same.

“This still allows for choice,” McPhatter said. “At a time when TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and the internet reign supreme in our children’s lives, literature is the very least of our worries.”

Beverly Jones, a retired ACPS educator, told the board bias, book-banning and censorship have no place in the schools and no “small portion of this county should dictate what others have access to.”

“Just because you don’t want to read it or see it, that doesn’t give you the right to deny others,” Jones said.

Jones said the sexually explicit content issue and critical race theory, a hot-button topic that was center stage in the 2021 gubernatorial election, are instilling fear and panic in parents when the division is working to make up academic ground during a pandemic.

“Our school system is laboring to rebound from months of lost educational opportunities. Some of you keep fouling those efforts by interjection of misinformation, lies and distortion, and it did not originate here in Amherst County,” Jones said. “Instead of being a part of the solution, some of you are creating problems where none exist.”

Ambria Wood, an ACPS parent, said it appears some on the school board have lost focus on doing what is best for teachers and children in public schools.

“Instead of being a board that supports our teachers who are teaching to a Virginia state board curriculum, you have decided that parents know more than teachers and should get to opine upon lesson plans,” Wood said.

Amherst resident Sam Soghor urged the board to not disrupt the machine of public education for a political agenda and to brush aside any ludicrous notion educators are all in on a vast conspiracy to indoctrinate children.

“We don’t need them to waste their time defending themselves,” Soghor said. “We need them focused on teaching the students reading.”

Soghor and other speakers urged the board to stay clear of banning books or silencing academics. “You’ve got us right now on a disturbingly slippery slope,” he told the board.

Madison Heights resident Gloria Witt said the opt-in measure is an example of indoctrinating by limiting access to education. It disrupts education, subverts Virginia Department of Education-controlled curriculum and facilitates what she described as the lie that public education is grooming students about gender, equity, diversity and multiculturalism.

“It builds a wall or a structural barrier for students to have access to broad knowledge necessary for critical thinking and decision-making,” Witt said. “...The opt-in policy ignores the school board’s responsibility to provide an equitable education to all students... Sounds like the voting rights era when marginalized people and women had to jump through hoops to vote. Now the students must jump through hoops for knowledge.”

Witt told the board to listen when teachers, who are in the trenches each day, push back.

County resident Barbara Pryor said some board members, without naming any, are “openly partisan” and working to implement a biased, anti-democratic, right-wing agenda under watchful eyes of political operatives.

“Politically motivated standards are imposed and critical thinking is not encouraged,” Pryor said, adding: “Amherst County, especially the children, deserve better.”

County resident Jeff Porter was the only speaker to support the opt-in idea, saying he isn’t certain how the entire county population feels on it since the board only hears from those who make their voices heard.

“We all want the best for our children,” Porter said.

Board member Eric Orasi said the board tries to look out for the students in everything it does and says, and policy can be changed.

“Most teachers I know don’t teach sexually explicit material,” Orasi said. “Opt-in won’t affect them at all.”

Orasi said he wants children to learn “age appropriately.”

“I do not want to ban books and I don’t think anybody on this board is OK with banning books,” Orasi said.

Justice said if there is no sexually explicit material, it should not create any extra work and noted the opt-out policy, not an opt-in, is in place for any non-sexually explicit learning materials.

Grieser said his being against the opt-in policy, as an ACPS parent himself, doesn't mean he relinquishes his parental rights.

"...As an elected official, as a member of this board, we also oversee the school system and there's a balance," Grieser said. "We take the input of the parents and we make informed decisions and we also consider the staff."

Grieser said whenever he hears from anyone to put aside what ACPS staff wants it drives him nuts and expressed concerns that "an environment of distrust and micromanaging every decision" as a board will lead to more employees leaving the division.

"Not a single one of them come in there with malice in their heart to do something to those kids," Grieser said. "And I'm sick of this fear that gets promulgated."

Grieser also voiced frustrations with the advertisement of a recent Amherst County Republican Committee meeting featuring education and asked if pornography and "CRT indoctrination" is in ACPS schools. He said people were invited to speak at that meeting who never stepped foot inside an ACPS building and the division's superintendent was not given the common courtesy of an invite to defend the division.

"That's ridiculous," Grieser said. "I didn't get elected on any party platform, I don't affiliate with any party platform. We've got at some point come back to center and realize that's there are people on both sides of the fence and we've got to stop depriving our children because we're worried about what they might learn. I raised my kids, if they learn something in school — I can also have a good conversation with them at home to explain my values."

Grieser said he is growing more frustrated with the current political climate around public education.

“I don’t want to see this turn into some kind of circus,” Grieser said. “I never imagined three years ago when I came on this board that we would deal with the things we’re dealing with... We’ve got to start realizing that we cannot be political pawns — that we have got to make decisions that are in the best interests of this school division, and also, not just listen to the parental side all the time but that we’ve got to figure out the middle and respect our staff to make those decisions.”

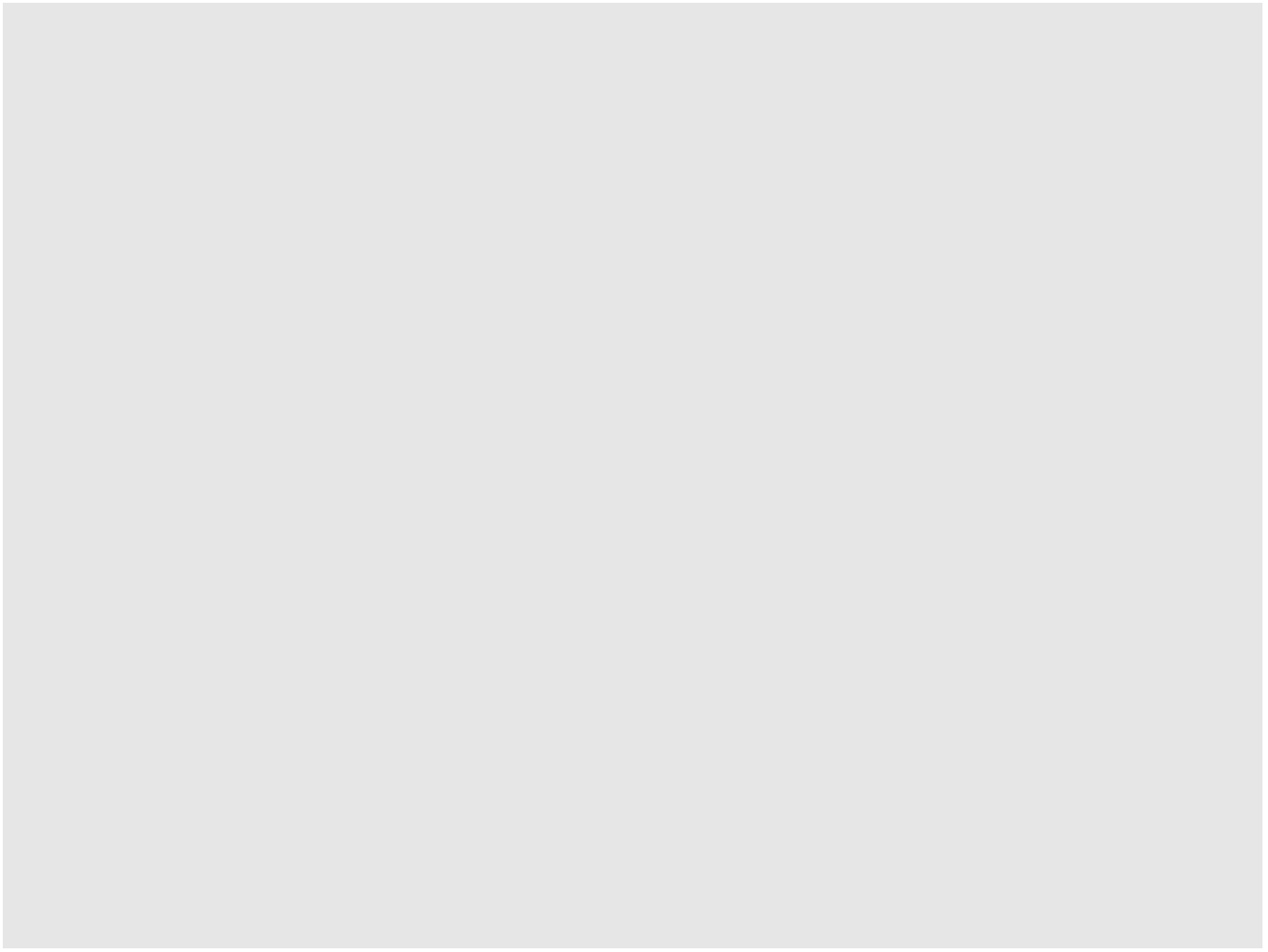
His comments drew applause from many in the crowd during Thursday’s meeting, which he said he wasn’t trying to get.

“At the end of the day, you’re sending a message of distrust to the staff and I’m sick of it,” he said of the opt-in policy. “We’ve got to do something to change that.”

Board member Priscilla Liggon said she feels it would be in the board’s best interest to revisit that policy soon.

Chris Terry, the board’s chair, thanked all who spoke during the emotional comments session.

“We need to hear all sides,” Terry said.



Correction

Board member Dawn Justice said an opt-out policy for parents is in place for all non-sexually explicit materials in Amherst County Public Schools. The story previously incorrectly said the policy was opt-in for those non-sexually explicit materials and has been updated.

By Justin Faulconer
