

EDUCATION

School board races are becoming battlegrounds for national debates. Communities are feeling the impacts.

In Virginia, the partisan schisms are having effects far beyond hourslong school board meetings. They're dampening morale in classrooms, teachers say, and in some places, longtime board members who have grown tired of the infighting have opted to not seek reelection.



by **Lisa Rowan**
October 16, 2023



Campaign signs in Montgomery County, where multiple school board seats were contested this fall. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

Privacy - Terms

On a sunny Thursday evening in September, about a hundred people gathered on the wide lawn next the central office for Roanoke County Public Schools, some of them arriving hours ahead of the division's monthly school board meeting.

About two-thirds of the early arrivals had gathered to show support for area transgender students, many holding homemade signs and rainbow flags. A football field's length away, about 30 members of a local church formed a loose circle to praise the county's five school board members, who had voted unanimously in August to adopt Gov. Glenn Youngkin's model policies to limit accommodations for transgender students.

Supporters of the new model policies say it's a win for parents' rights; opponents, like the students who gathered with their signs, fear it will foster discrimination of transgender and nonbinary students.

The pastor leading the prayers for the Baptist church group wore a body camera on the lapel of his blazer, mentioning it several times as he stated his desire to avoid an altercation with the other group.



Dueling protests preceded the Sept. 21 Roanoke County School Board meeting. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

The dueling protests — the pastor with a microphone and portable speaker, the student organizer with a malfunctioning borrowed megaphone — each kept to its own area of the field. The school board meeting that followed that night was also

relatively quiet: Although the room was full when it began, it was the first Roanoke County School Board meeting in three months where an audience member wasn't arrested by officers on the premises for disorderly conduct or trespassing.

In Southwest Virginia and across the state, school boards have operated under the microscope during COVID mitigation and the rise of the parental rights movement.

School board elections are nonpartisan in 41 states, including Virginia, where 89% of school boards are elected. But in some areas, increasing polarization has made it nearly impossible to keep partisan politics off school boards.

The schisms are having effects far beyond hourslong school board meetings. They're dampening morale in classrooms, teachers say, and in some places, longtime board members who have grown tired of the infighting have opted to not seek reelection.

Tense school board meetings are nothing new, but the attention that's getting paid to those debates heightened over the past few years as school boards had to focus on COVID issues, said Verjeana McCotter-Jacobs, executive director and CEO of the National School Boards Association.

"The pandemic thrust everybody on high alert around policies in general," McCotter-Jacobs said, not just regarding public schools. As school divisions made decisions about how to educate children safely during the pandemic, citizens — with their widely varying views on the pandemic's severity — were paying attention.

That intense level of scrutiny hasn't let up.

And then add the fact that political polarization has been on the rise for 30 years, said Amanda Wintersieck, associate professor and director of the Institute for Democracy, Pluralism and Community Empowerment at Virginia Commonwealth University.

► Cardinal's voter guide to school board races around the region

That polarization has increased primarily on a national level, but it also has trickled down into state legislatures and local governments.

"We used to say all politics are local," Wintersieck said. "Today we'd say all politics are national."

Prior to Barack Obama's presidency, Wintersieck said, Democrats and Republicans looked a lot alike on a national level. But as the range of voices across American government has become more diverse, the two parties have moved further apart from their commonalities at the center. It's more difficult to have those nonpartisan elections when the sides are closer to the poles, she explained.

The influence of political parties is hard to avoid in some so-called nonpartisan school board campaigns this fall.

In Montgomery County, for instance, two school board candidates, Lindsay Rich for District E and Mark Mear in District B, have been endorsed by the local Republican Party. Facebook “Policy Monday” features by Rich posted in August and September have exclusively discussed how the candidate would support the governor’s trans student policies. Rich and Mear are slated to host an event together at a local coffee shop, with the tagline “We’re not politicians, we’re parents” prominent on the flier.

In neighboring Roanoke County, the local Republican Party has endorsed Shelley Clemons for the open Cave Spring seat and incumbent Brent Hudson in the Catawba District. Both candidates count parental rights among their priorities. Hudson, who currently serves as board chair, is being challenged by Samantha Newell, a parent who launched a write-in campaign in August. Newell spoke at the student-led rally before the September school board meeting, and during public comment at several school board meetings over the summer, in support of LGBTQ+ students.

And as partisan politics come into play for school board elections, Wintersieck said one likely outcome is that more extreme candidates on either side of the aisle will run for — and win — elections.

One group backing some of those candidates is Moms for Liberty, a group that launched during the pandemic under the banner of parents’ rights and has espoused anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-diversity and inclusion rhetoric. Candidates endorsed by the group won 275 of the 500 races the organization promoted in 2022. Eventually, Moms for Liberty wants its chapters to serve as “watchdogs” for all 13,000 school districts across the country.

The Moms for Liberty chapter in Bedford County has already begun to gain influence on that school board. Last fall, Chris Daniels won a special election to finish the final year of a term in District 7, which was open due to a resignation. He listed parental involvement in children’s education as his primary issue, followed by a need to “get back to the fundamentals” of education, and he touted endorsements from the Bedford County GOP and the local chapter of Moms for Liberty. Tiffany Justice, one of the cofounders of Moms for Liberty, visited the county during early voting last November.

Daniels won with nearly 53% of the vote. In his first year on the board, Daniels was one of two members who pushed to update Bedford County’s policy for “teaching about controversial issues.” The [policy update](#) approved in June after several months of debate prohibits teachers from initiating discussions with students about sexual orientation or gender identity.

Daniels has been endorsed again by both groups as he runs this fall for a full term.

In Montgomery County, the Moms for Liberty chapter that launched earlier this year endorsed Mear, the former superintendent, in his race against Penny Franklin. Longtime incumbent Franklin was on the board when it made the unanimous call to fire Mear in 2022 after he allegedly shouted at a county schools employee for 45 minutes because he felt the county’s trans student policy violated his own rights as a parent. Mear is running on a “back to basics” platform focusing on academic achievement.

“The candidate must support parental rights,” said chair Ginny Perfater of the chapter’s criteria for endorsement. “After speaking with Mark, we believe his values align with ours.”

She said the decision among the group's "roughly 20" members to endorse him was unanimous.



A Sept. 7 school board candidate forum in Montgomery County drew a crowd. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

Polarization can lead to whiplash for school divisions

Education used to be an issue where almost everyone agreed on one key point: that children deserve high-quality public education, Wintersieck said. But in some places, it's no longer easy to identify basic common ground among candidates. "The tone of the conversation has changed," she said.

The issues being debated at these public meetings have become more visceral, Wintersieck said. They reveal not only what people think about the U.S. public education system, but also what they think about at the core of human identity.

"The guardrails have come off democracy in the way we discuss these issues, in what we put forward as facts," Wintersieck said.

Kimberly Irvin, a special education teacher at Hidden Valley High School in Roanoke County, said she had never gotten up to speak in public before the May board meeting that split the community in two. At that May meeting, local parent and

real estate agent Damon Gettier talked for nearly a minute and a half over the allotted three minutes per speaker, calling out four staffers by position who he claimed were “bent on indoctrinating our children on LGBTQA and not reading, writing and arithmetic.”

In response, the board passed a policy that said teachers can’t display classroom decor that promotes any political, socio-political or religious beliefs.

Gettier didn’t use names, but Irvin could tell who he was talking about. One of the people he called out for being a so-called groomer particularly shocked Irvin. “I was listening to my colleague, and a teacher my children adore, being openly abused verbally,” Irvin said. “And the people who employed this person, who should have protected them, didn’t step in. And that was the final straw for me,” she said. She’s spoken at almost every board meeting since, making a point to say that her views are her own as a parent and educator.

Irvin initially feared retaliation for her statements in support of LGBTQ+ students and teachers, but she says she hasn’t experienced any — though she was one of three teachers in her school recently asked to remove small rainbow decorations from personal property the day before a visit by a school board member. The teachers complied but are waiting for clarification from the administrator about whether they’ll be able to display the decorations again.

Irvin said she’s so fearful for the future of the Roanoke County School Board that for the first time, she’s volunteering for a political campaign. She’s backing Mary Wilson, who’s running for the open seat against Republican-backed Shelley Clemons.

And she said that she and her husband have discussed whether it could make sense to leave the school district where she works and her children attend if the school board continues to increase its conservative seats. “I could homeschool, but it’s not what I want to do or what I want for [my kids],” she said. “They love their school and I love teaching at my school.”

Meanwhile, she said discussion among teachers in the division who have considered leaving has escalated. “It used to be the county was the coveted teaching position.” Now, her colleagues are thinking about looking for work in Roanoke or Salem. Both neighboring divisions offer higher pay, she said. And both of them have school boards appointed by the city council.

The impact of school board members with viewpoints on far ends of the spectrum on the classroom climate for teachers may become more evident in the coming years.

Starting after the 2021-2022 school year, the Virginia Department of Education began collecting data from school divisions about why teachers and administrators chose to leave.

Only 63 of the more than 1,700 teachers who left their positions in summer 2022 said that “outside pressure from parents, community, social media” was among the top three reasons for their departure. Three of those 63 teachers had worked in Bedford County, where Moms for Liberty has an active presence.

Statewide data for the 2022-2023 school year isn't yet available. Roanoke County shared the data it sent to the state this summer, which showed only one instance of a teacher leaving the division due in part to outside pressure; most of the 115 teachers who left reported that they took a job in another public school division or chose as their reason "family/personal considerations."

Nor are top administrators immune to anxiety that can come from board politics.

In Radford, attendees packed the board room and overflow area in June for the last meeting with Superintendent Robert Graham, who had suddenly announced his resignation amid rumors that new conservative board members had forced him out. The livestream of the nearly four-hour meeting, which shows Graham holding back tears while receiving a standing ovation from the school board and the crowd, has more than 4,000 views on YouTube.

Two of the three new members elected to the board in fall 2022, Gloria Boyd and Chris Calfee, were endorsed by the Radford Republican Committee. Their influence was evident as soon as they attended their first board meeting, said Graham, who had been superintendent for eight years. Suddenly, several board members wanted to be involved in the day-to-day operations of the school division, which took up a lot of Graham's time and energy, he said.

"The number one job [of a school board member] is policies and procedures," he said, not day-to-day operations.

It took less than six months for Graham to resign, for what he has described as board member micromanagement of himself and of other teachers and administrators. As the relationship between Graham and the board soured and monthly meetings grew more tense, Graham said it became a distraction to what really mattered: focusing on the city's children.

Graham, who was immediately hired as superintendent in neighboring Pulaski County, said some candidates who run for school board seats might be surprised by the duties involved. But if new board members are trying to push an agenda, the regular duties of the school board won't really support that, Graham said.

In an [interview with The Roanoke Times](#) in June, Boyd, a retired teacher, said that the current board has worked within its authority but wouldn't automatically approve policy proposals "without asking questions."

School board Chair Jenny Riffe did not respond to an email request for comment for this story.

The turnover of school board members during election years is something superintendents worry about, Graham said. Administrators may know their current board members' expectations and priorities, but "you don't know what's coming" once that board changes, he said. If administrators have to change their methods to meet dramatically different board expectations, for better or for worse, it's likely there will be similar disruptions for teachers in the classroom as well.

McCotter-Jacobs of the National School Boards Association said a major challenge for modern school boards is centering conversations "around the best interests of children within the context of community." Every community is different, which is why local decision-making is so important, she said. But those big decisions that often have ties to local finances come with a lot of responsibility.

“A single-issue candidate is going to learn really quick and realize there’s so much to be held accountable for,” she said.

Attendance at Radford School Board meetings has died down for now. No board seats are up for election this fall. But the battle lines have been drawn between liberal residents, some of whom are organizing a recall effort to try to remove the board’s conservative members, and more conservative residents who have largely been quiet at recent meetings.

In Pulaski County, Graham could find himself working with another divided board.

When the last board was elected in 2019, most candidates were incumbents and each ran unopposed. This year, each district’s race has two candidates, and the local Republican Party has endorsed a candidate in each one.



Election signs in Pulaski County. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

Social media makes campaigning easier for a job that’s always been hard

It’s easier to keep up with local school boards than ever before.

Many school divisions started livestreaming meetings during the pandemic, and school board members and candidates often operate Facebook pages to promote their work to constituents. That helps candidates reach voters at home on their devices. But it has also turned up the volume on the feedback that candidates and school board members get from the public.

In 2022, a public commenter at a Montgomery County School Board meeting showed Facebook photos of school board chair Sue Kass not wearing a mask indoors, which the speaker said was hypocritical of the county policy.

Kass, who said the photos were taken in a private setting with her “COVID pod,” stormed out of the meeting as the speaker, Alecia Vaught, warned, “We’re coming for your seats.”

Vaught, who runs an organization based in Christiansburg called Second Monday Constitution Group, repeated the statement during a segment on the Fox & Friends program on Fox News a few days later, saying, “We’re getting these liberals off of our school board.”

“I got death threats, thousands of emails, my husband and kids were threatened,” Kass said, after Vaught’s speech and her own reaction went viral.

She said politics hadn’t been a factor in her race for a school board seat in 2019. Up until that point, the former county teacher said the primary division on the school board had been over school funding and equal treatment of schools in the Blacksburg area, which has four seats on the board, versus the Christiansburg area, which has three.

Now, she said, it’s a battle of political parties. “COVID was the shift,” she said. “COVID exacerbated everything. It brought out the worst in everyone.”

The intensity of the political division in the school district has led to infighting on the school board, leaving the entire body frustrated and unable to focus, she said. Kass is finishing her four-year term on the board this fall. She’s not running again, partly because of demands at her day job, but also because she couldn’t fathom putting her family through another four years of it.

Years ago, the only way to get that kind of access to a school board member was to attend the often hourslong meetings in person.

Jerry Canada, who spent 25 years on the Roanoke County School Board representing the Hollins District, can recall when there wasn’t a time limit for speakers during public comment, causing some meetings to last until close to midnight.

“We almost never talked about politics. No one cared which way you leaned,” he said. “We never lost control.” But he admitted it’s a tough job to be on a school board — and it always has been.

When the board of supervisors changed the school board from appointed to elected in the mid-1990s, Canada decided he’d run to maintain his seat. He was never opposed in any of his reelection years until he chose not to run again in 2017.

In 2021, Canada ran again but lost to current board member David Linden. Canada said he found it difficult to come up with a clear platform. He knew it was hard to promise anything to voters, he said, when a three-person majority would be required to pass on the five-person board. “You can’t do anything unless you get two other people to agree with you,” he said.

Two new statewide groups have sprung up this year to support school board candidates and members. Both claim to be nonpartisan, but the School Board Member Alliance based in Forest is right-leaning, while the We the People for Education in Richmond leans left.

The School Board Member Alliance focuses on providing training about what school board members can do, rather than focusing on what they can’t, according to its website. It supports parental rights and educational freedom while encouraging discourse among school board members. That mission echoes a complaint held by some school board members that the Virginia School Boards Association, which was up until now the standard for guidance in the state and represented all school boards, is too liberal.

(The Virginia School Boards Association offers training and policy guidance along with limited legal consulting for member school divisions but is not a member of the National School Boards Association. It withdrew from the national association in 2022 after raising questions about that group’s governance.)

Cheryl Facciani, a member of the Roanoke County School Board, and Chris Daniels from the Bedford County School Board are directors for the School Board Member Alliance, which lists parents’ rights as one of its key priorities.

We the People for Education, meanwhile, lists “pushing back against political extremism” among its goals. Anne Holton, former Virginia secretary of education and current Virginia Board of Education member, is an advisory board member.

Either of these groups could win the loyalty of school board candidates or members who want to do things differently than in the past. In September, the Warren County School Board voted 4-1 to withdraw its VSBA membership, saying the association didn’t represent the interests of the school division.

These statewide groups have the potential to serve as proxies for political parties for school board hopefuls seeking to keep an appearance of nonpartisanship during election season. Others may prefer to have their name aligned with the local Democratic or Republican party to aid their name recognition when voters head to the polls.

With the new classroom decor and trans model policies now firmly in place in Roanoke County schools, it’s hard to tell when the crowds will subside. November election results could calm the discourse, or further stoke public disagreement.

All that’s truly clear for school board meetings throughout the region is that there’s a new normal for what qualifies as “business as usual.”

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EDUCATION

Roanoke County school board denied community tension over transgender policies, yet police presence at meetings multiplied

After arrests at a July school board meeting, the U.S. Department of Justice offered to mediate discussions about new transgender student policies in Roanoke. The school system rejected the offer, but continued to add more police to meetings.



by **Lisa Rowan**
November 3, 2023



Attendees hold signs outside the Roanoke County School Board meeting on July 27, 2023, as Roanoke County police officers look on. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

Lately, when Roanoke County School Board chair Brent Hudson gets up from his seat during meetings to congratulate student athletes or present awards to staffers, two uniformed deputies of the county sheriff's office go with him.

They stand in front of the dais where Hudson and the other four school board members often pose for photos with the awardees. Then the deputies return to their seats, one in each corner behind the dais. Each wears a tactical vest emblazoned with SHERIFF in block letters as they watch the room.

The two deputies are joined in the boardroom and the halls of the central office by up to a dozen combined sheriff's deputies and officers from the Roanoke County Police Department.

Though it's typical for a police officer to be on the scene at public meetings, law enforcement presence dramatically increased over the summer as Roanoke County School Board meetings **repeatedly drew large crowds** asking to speak about two of the division's new policies: one to limit pride-themed classroom decor, and the other to adopt the Youngkin administration's new, more restrictive rules for dealing with transgender students. For two months, the crowd had almost unanimously asked the board not to pass the policies, but in each case, the board did so unanimously.

Officers arrested two people on trespassing charges at the July school board meeting after they refused to leave the room during a boisterous exchange between attendees and Hudson that led Hudson to order the room cleared. Hudson, a major with the local sheriff's office, flashed his badge that night after one of the people who got arrested approached him during the exchange, an action the county sheriff later told The Roanoke Times **was within reason**.

A few days later, Hudson and vice chair Tim Greenway received a letter from the U.S. Department of Justice's Community Relations Service offering to mediate "community tensions."

Roanoke County schools superintendent Ken Nicely rejected the offer, denying widespread tension within the community. And a week later, the sheriff's deputies appeared at the dais for the August school board meeting.

That night, another person was arrested.

And as summer turned to fall, a growing division between liberal and conservative attendees at school board meetings has crystalized. Now, it's unclear how long the increased police presence will last despite earlier claims from the school division and board members that community tension wasn't a problem.



Police officers flank the Roanoke County School Board on Aug. 17, 2023. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

Documents show RCPS denied conflict when Department of Justice offered to mediate

The Department of Justice Community Relations Service [contacted the school board](#) on July 31, just days after news outlets reported on two arrests at the July 27 board meeting.

Hannah Levine, a conciliation specialist in the office, said by email the CRS was “aware of ongoing community tensions in Roanoke County” following the release of the new model policies for transgender students. “I’d like to connect to see if we might be able to offer support and services as you work to manage conflict within the community related to this.”

Levine noted in her email that the CRS “serves as ‘America’s Peacemaker,’ preventing and responding to community tensions and hate crimes” along with bullying, bias and discrimination. She didn’t say how the agency learned about the conflict, or whether it was asked to intervene.



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Rhonda Stegall

From: Levine, Hannah (CRS) <Hannah.Levine@usdoj.gov>
Sent: Monday, July 31, 2023 2:29 PM
To: bhudson@rcps.us; tgreenway@rcps.us
Subject: Reaching out from the Community Relations Service

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of Roanoke County Public Schools. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Hello Mr. Hudson and Mr. Greenway,

I hope this email finds you well!

I'm reaching out from the Community Relations Service at the U.S. Department of Justice to introduce myself and offer our services in conflict resolution. The Community Relations Service (CRS) serves as "America's Peacemaker," preventing and responding to community tensions and hate crimes, bias, bullying, and discrimination committed on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and disability.

CRS is aware of ongoing community tensions in Roanoke County following the release of the new model policies for transgender students. I'd like to connect to see if we might be able to offer support and services as you work to manage conflict within the community related to this.

If you would like to set up a time to speak about our conflict resolution services, please let me know. I have availability beginning Monday, August 7th, and I'm open to dates/times that work for you. In the meantime, please feel free to check out our website at <https://www.justice.gov/crs> for more information about us and the work that we do.

All the best,
 Hannah

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Roanoke County DOJ emails August 2023

It's unclear how long the message sat in Hudson's and Greenway's inboxes before they forwarded the message to superintendent Ken Nicely.

But conservative news website Daily Wire reported on the offer to Roanoke County on Aug. 8, at which point school board members recoiled at the accusation of conflict in the community, according to correspondence obtained via the Freedom of Information Act.

In a group text message among five participants, Greenway objected to a news headline about the offer that cited "community tensions."

"That's what's wrong here," he wrote. "'Community tensions,' there are no community tensions. Unless 20-25 people constitute community tensions," Greenway said, indicating the lineup of LGBTQ+ supporters that had dominated the public comment portion of the meeting for two months straight.

"That's absolutely right, Tim!" board member Cheryl Facciani responded. "Great point!! We don't have a conflict."

Greenway suggested not responding, saying the division's policies speak for themselves. "We respect everyone already. No need to get in the weeds with anyone. Everyone is safe in our schools as it should be."

The next morning, Nicely spoke with State Superintendent Lisa Coons, a Youngkin appointee, who according to an email from Nicely to the board members said that he should respond and "clearly decline the offer" rather than ignore it.

Nicely then wrote to Levine, "We have heard from local citizens from across the spectrum and there does not seem to be any widespread, ongoing community tension in Roanoke County citizens regarding the model policies." He downplayed the two arrests, saying "neither person had a connection with our school system" and one of the two people lived outside the county. "We are not in need of your services and respectfully decline your offer," he concluded.

That afternoon, Hudson said he gave an interview to Fox News, commenting afterward to board members by text that "they didn't make it political and hopefully it will be good for us."

The same afternoon, Cheryl Facciani questioned the CRS' motivation in an email message to board members, wondering if it was an "act of intimidation." She and Greenway both wondered if other school divisions had received similar correspondence.

In response to questions about whether other school divisions had received similar offers, a Department of Justice spokesperson said by email that its services are voluntary and include a confidentiality clause to "foster trust and ensure the privacy of all parties involved."

The DOJ office, which was created by Congress in 1964, "has no law enforcement role and is required to remain a neutral party while it assists state and local units of government, private and public organizations, law enforcement and community groups in resolving conflicts," the spokesperson said by email.

In August, the board unanimously passed the VDOE trans model policies wholesale, despite more than 80% of the speakers during public comment that night expressing concerns that they would be too restrictive and would foster discrimination of LGBTQ+ students.

Five days later, Reps. Ben Cline and Morgan Griffith [penned a letter to Hudson](#), "to urge" the school board to continue to reject offers from CRS. "The parents, elected school board members, and Roanoke County taxpayers are much better suited to make important decisions about Roanoke County school matters than unelected bureaucrats from Washington, D.C.," it said.

0:00

Police escort school board members as they leave the boardroom on Aug. 17, 2023, while officers arrest an attendee. Video by Lisa Rowan.

After denying ‘community tensions,’ law enforcement presence increased at school board meetings

It may have put on a cool demeanor in responding to the DOJ, but the Roanoke County School Board increased the police presence at meetings even after it responded to the letter.

Law enforcement had first begun to tick up in June. On June 13, Hudson asked superintendent Nicely by text message if he had requested “an extra law enforcement officer” for the meeting on June 15. “Due to the circumstances and today’s front page article in The Times, I’d say we should.”

Hudson was referencing Roanoke Times coverage of the May school board meeting, during which real estate broker Damon Gettier made accusations during public comment that specific staff members were using rainbow decor and pride-themed displays to indoctrinate children. He did so despite a rule for public comment that complaints about specific staff members be directed to school administrators.

The recording of that meeting shows that at least one sheriff’s deputy was present inside the boardroom at the June meeting.

But that was the only time a school board member or division staff member raised a discussion about having extra law enforcement at meetings by text or email, according to a Freedom of Information Act request covering June through September.

The county police department typically provides an officer at school board meetings. “These are off-duty assignments” filled by a police department supervisor, explained county public information officer Amy Whittaker by email. “If the

department does not have enough officers to fill the off-duty assignments, they ask the Sheriff's Office to assist." When asked for the policy or other document that states how those posts are assigned, she said no such document existed.

Hudson declined to speak on the matter, saying by email that Nicely makes decisions with local law enforcement about security at school board meetings.

When asked Friday about increased law enforcement at meetings, Nicely said the division consults with the police department to determine the presence necessary at meetings, and that need can fluctuate depending on anticipated attendance or topics of discussion. Nicely also sometimes speaks with board members about security measures, he said.

The school division pays for the officers' time.

Nicely said that after the large attendance at the June school board meeting, the police department advised that if large crowds continued, additional officers would be recommended "at least for a few months, for everyone's safety, to make sure things don't get out of hand." He said additional officers also serve to provide reinforcements for the safety of officers on location. "We're trying to be more proactive instead of reactive," Nicely said.

That's one reason the school division changed its system for public comment sign-ups at school board meetings, Nicely explained: to gauge advance interest in each meeting.

Previously, attendees could sign up to speak as they arrived at the school board meeting. After the two arrests in July, the county started requiring speakers to sign up online or by phone by 8 a.m. the day of a school board meeting, and to sign in with photo identification by 5:30 that evening to confirm their spot on the list.

He said additional factors may warrant a request for more officers. "If people are planning to stage a protest or something like that," the division might learn about it through social media or get information from the police department. "Based on those kinds of variables, we can respond appropriately."

Nicely said that having officers distributed throughout the room allows them to "pinpoint any issues" and address individual situations that may arise in the crowd rather than clear the room if there's a disruption during the meeting.

The increased law enforcement has created anxiety for some residents who have spoken during public comment at meetings. Kerry Shepherd, the parent of a transgender high school student, was [speaking during the August school board meeting](#) when an arrest took place. Shepherd had become emotional during her remarks, and Hudson said she could have a few extra seconds to wrap up her comments. A few attendees shouted encouragement for her to continue, and when officers began to approach them, Brent Brewer called out that the chair should be the one seeking order in the meeting, rather than the officers.

As Brewer was cuffed and led out of the room, Shepherd remained at the podium, appearing frozen. "I was afraid to turn around because I thought they were coming up there for me" because she wasn't returning to her seat, she said. "It was really intimidating." Shepherd said she knew some of the officers from other meetings, "and they had always been really

nice to me. But there were so many, like every corner of the building, and in the room itself, and I was sure they were coming to me.”

Brewer, the parent of a transgender child, was charged with disorderly conduct. He was later found guilty.

Division among school board meeting attendees has increased. How will RCPS respond?

School board meeting attendance and public speaker lineups have varied widely over the 10 months since Hudson was installed as board chair. But the speaker signup list exploded after Gettier’s accusations at the May meeting, and did not immediately wane after the new signup procedure was implemented.

In June, 31 people spoke to the board during the public comment period, all but one speaking in support of teachers and staff and asserting support of LGBTQ+ students. The other speaker was a division staffer who talked about a school nutrition issue.

At the July meeting, 27 people spoke, all in support of LGBTQ+ students and/or asking the board not to pass the décor policy and the transgender student policy.

Again in August, 27 people spoke ahead of the board’s unanimous approval of the trans model policy. But that meeting was a turning point, with a mix of views on display. Five of the 27 people spoke in favor of the model policy, often citing their Christian faith and parental rights as they pushed the board to approve the policy.

In September, 21 people spoke. Six were in support of the board and the model policy.

At the October meeting, which was rescheduled to a day earlier than its usual slot on the third Thursday of the month, only 13 people spoke. But the divide was even more clear: Five of the 13 supported the board and the model policy, and all five of them were from the same local church.

The same people have spoken to the board, sometimes four or five months in a row, pleading for policies they say respect LGBTQ+ students. Fourteen of the speakers in July were also among the 31 speakers at the June meeting.

But now the opposing side favoring parental rights is seeing repeat speakers, some of whom have used part of their three-minute window to recite prayers or scripture verses. In October, speaker Daniel Bynum slammed what he described the LGBTQ+ community as “trying to dominate our children and make them hypersexualized,” adding, “The idea that children choose their gender is absurd and demonically deranged at best.”

It’s uncertain what will happen at the next school board meeting on Nov. 8, just one day after the election for two seats on the Roanoke County School Board. The board will retain a majority of conservative members even if both Samantha Newell and Mary Wilson win against their Republican-backed opponents. Wilson is running against Shelley Clemons for the open seat in the Cave Spring district. Newell announced her write-in campaign against Hudson in the Catawba district at the August school board meeting.

Nicely said he’s not sure how long discussion of the transgender student policy will continue, which he noted has begun to evolve to a discussion of wider social issues. “We don’t currently have a policy that says you can only speak about things on the agenda,” he said, as some other school divisions do.

EDUCATION

'I'm not safe here': This teenager won't stop advocating for LGBTQ+ students in Roanoke County

Roanoke County's school board retained its conservative majority in last week's election. Fifteen-year-old Keely Meadows and other advocates want to keep LGBTQ+ rights in the spotlight.



by **Lisa Rowan**
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Keely Meadows (right, in tan pants) speaks at a demonstration she organized in support of LGBTQ+ students in Roanoke County on Sept. 21. At far right is Sa Newell, a write-in candidate for the Catawba school board seat whose campaign Keely supported. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

Keely Meadows has tried everything. She has calmly pleaded with the Roanoke County School Board to support LGBTQ+ and special education students. She has scolded board members for looking at their phones while she speaks. She has shouted, demanding board chair Brent Hudson apologize for “causing emotional distress” to the LGBTQ+ student community.

And still she feels like no one's listening.

Keely, 15, is one of the youngest advocates for LGBTQ+ students in the school division. But she has repeatedly approached the podium over six months of school board meetings. Barely 5 feet tall, with long brown hair bearing vibrant, neon highlights, she has emerged as a prominent organizer of LGBTQ+ support in conservative Roanoke County.

The county school division has spent much of 2023 embroiled in issues impacting LGBTQ+ students as elections for two of the five spots on its school board approached.

In February, a Glenvar High School student used the public comment period of a school board meeting to accuse a transgender student of recording her in the girls' bathroom; the next month, the accused student responded, also during a meeting.

In May, a parent stood up in front of the board and said there were too many rainbows and other pride-themed symbols at his children's school; the next month, 31 parents, students and division staffers spoke during a 90-minute public comment period in defense of the LGBTQ+ community.

In August, Roanoke County became one of the first school boards in the state to adopt the Youngkin administration's new restrictions on transgender and gender nonconforming students, which limit their rights unless they have parental sign-off.

As crowds at school board meetings swelled and a series of arrests took place, the U.S. Department of Justice's mediation service contacted the division to offer its services. Roanoke County **[rejected the offer as it continued to increase law enforcement presence at its monthly meetings.](#)**

The conservative voices in the crowd calling for limitations on gender-affirming care for LGBTQ+ students at school have usually been adults; sometimes speakers say they have a child or grandchild in the division, or that they're simply a concerned resident. They are often affiliated with one of a few local churches that have rallied several rows' worth of attendees to school board meetings. Since June, none of the speakers supporting the new trans student policy have been local students.

The more liberal voices at meetings, meanwhile, have run the gamut. Speakers as young as elementary school age have addressed the board, and some teenagers who attend high school in the county have come back repeatedly to speak. They've been backed by young adults representing local diversity organizations, along with parents and several teachers who have returned again and again.

But months have passed since the August adoption of the transgender student model policies. And conservatives kept their hold on the school board in last week's election for two seats, reelecting Hudson and installing Shelley Clemons in the open Cave Spring seat.

Both winning candidates were backed by the local Republican Party.

Mary Wilson, who ran against Clemons, picked up 45.6% of the vote. Samantha Newell, a write-in candidate who announced her run in August, received about 16% of the vote in the Catawba district that reelected Hudson.

For months, Keely has felt that the board listens to speakers who support the revised transgender student policies but ignores those who have raised concerns about it. "I'm one of those people they turn their heads at and don't listen to. And it's sad because I'm a student," she said.

Hudson's lack of response to her repeated requests to speak added fuel to the fire driving her to go up to the podium repeatedly, she said at the October meeting when she demanded an apology from the chair. "But not everybody can stand up like I can."



Keely Meadows holds a sign that says "I am not safe here" during the Nov. 8 Roanoke County School Board meeting. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

'I am not safe here'

The day after the election, Keely was back, arriving close to an hour before the 6 p.m. start of the November board meeting to find a seat near the front of the room. But the front three rows were already full, with members of a local church claiming their seats early. She took a seat in the fourth row and spent much of the meeting silently holding a sign that said in heavy black marker: "I am not safe here."

The room, which can hold about 60 people plus school staff and board members, lacked the buzz it's had during previous meetings. It was crowded, but not so much that anyone arriving after 5:30 p.m. was relegated to the overflow room that had to be used over the summer.

It's been a challenging few months for Keely. She started ninth grade at Northside High School but left after a few weeks, switching back to the homeschool format that she'd discovered during COVID fit her learning style better than being in the classroom.

In October, a local pastor and former school board member, Thomas McCracken, [sued her mother and a Roanoke City Council member](#) for defamation after he and Keely got into an argument after the August school board meeting. Keely had confronted McCracken after he posted a photo of her family on social media during the meeting and, she claimed, touched her during their disagreement.

The dispute spilled into the parking lot. Police officers escorted McCracken to his car, and as he drove away, Keely shouted obscenities at him. Keely is not named directly in the lawsuit but is referred to by her initials.

But Keely has not given up. She organized a demonstration before the board meeting in September that focused on students, knowing it would be yet another meeting with high tensions after two straight months of arrests.

Her event attracted a mix of more than 60 students and adults, with speakers including Deanna Marcin, a longtime transgender rights advocate in Roanoke, and school board candidates Wilson and Newell.

But the event, Keely said, "wasn't about politics. It was about students and what they go through because of the politics." Keely came out as transgender in elementary school and has told the board this summer about the bullying she endured during that period; she later detransitioned, returning to life as a girl.

The success of the demonstration led Keely to think even bigger; she's begun to plan a national event in 2024 to rally support for trans kids, she said, and wants to obtain permits for the National Mall in Washington. And she spent weeks canvassing on the weekends for Newell and Wilson, as well as for Democratic candidates seeking local and state office.

Keely looked peaceful, almost at ease, ahead of the Nov. 8 meeting, even though her preferred candidates didn't win. "It was worth it because we provided a second option" by promoting alternatives to the conservative candidates, including a write-in choice, she said. "And thousands of people across Roanoke County took advantage of that second option."



Keely Meadows addresses the Roanoke County School Board at its Nov. 8 meeting. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

When she approached the podium that night, one of a dozen speakers on the public comment list, she tried a new tack, one she's seen her adult opponents at school board meetings use: She spent part of her 3 minutes in prayer.

She prayed for equitable education for all children in the county, and for guidance for the board. "The board in front of me has not acted under you. Please lead this board in the direction of your son," she said.

Of the seven people who spoke in favor of supporting LGBTQ+ students, she was the only student.



Attendees at the Sept. 21 rally organized by Keely Meadows wrote messages of support for transgender students on banners and poster board signs. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

Facing activism fatigue

Tristan Shepherd wasn't at the school board meeting the night after the election. She didn't hear when resident Chris Eakin also prayed for the board and for Hudson, saying, "May he guide you to make decisions that are following the righteous path, even when the world pushes you to make different decisions."

Tristan wasn't at the September demonstration, either. In fact, the 17-year-old hasn't returned to the school system's central office, where school board meetings are held, since the night of the August board meeting. That night, as Tristan's mother, Kerry Shepherd, spoke through tears, one person was arrested in the crowd behind them on a disorderly conduct charge.

After the chaos in the room died down, it was Tristan's turn to speak. She summarized her comments as calling out the board for "sitting there not doing anything or listening."

Tristan came out as transgender in seventh grade and began hormone treatment in high school. She had never spoken in front of the school board before March 2023, when she defended herself against claims another student made at the February meeting. Without naming her, the student had accused Tristan of recording her in the girls' bathroom.

Tristan's family asked the school to release a statement saying the incident had been investigated and found to be false, but "They wouldn't do anything," Kerry Shepherd said in an October interview.

On the day following that February meeting, Tristan said she was followed and taunted on the way to the school bus. She came home and told her mother she wanted to speak to the board, because that's what the other student had done. "I wanted to try it and see if spreading my story would help."

She was last on the list of five speakers at the March meeting. But Tristan didn't feel that it helped, or that the board listened.

She went back in the summer, after response to the board's efforts to limit pride-themed decor and to adopt the new model policies for transgender students exploded. She wanted other transgender people to see and hear her speak.

But now, she feels like she's done what she can. "I've been avoiding the school board meetings," she said. She says they're not good for her mental health. "It's draining."

Instead, she's focused on leaving. She'll graduate in May, a year early, from Glenvar High, the smallest public high school in the county with about 600 students. She wants to attend college to study social work and become a therapist who works with transgender people.

Tristan isn't the only one who's backed away. The number of LGBTQ+ supporters speaking at school board meetings has waned over the course of the fall as a group of repeat conservative public commenters has grown.

Ryan White, a Roanoke psychiatrist who has spoken at several board meetings about challenges facing LGBTQ+ youth, said that burnout is common among political and social activists. Children and teenagers are even more vulnerable and can respond to this fatigue by slowing down or stopping their efforts — especially after the board's "unanimously dismissive" response to their pleas, White said.

"When push comes to shove, individuals otherwise have very busy routines, with lots of pressures to worry about," White explained.

"The natural tendency is not to keep fighting a fight where [you're] not being heard," he said, which may be particularly true for teens who feel intimidated by the board or law enforcement at meetings.

Add the pressure of increased law enforcement in the boardroom, "and it could certainly impact a teenager or child's decision making in whether they want to put themselves at that kind of risk," White said. "It's unfortunate that it appears to be an intimidation tactic."

As school board members made their final comments during last week's meeting, member Cheryl Facciani responded to something that several attendees had referenced: [In an August text message exchange](#), Facciani and board vice chair Tim Greenway were dismissive of the idea that there was tension in the school community — "Unless 20-25 people constitute community tensions," Greenway wrote, referring to the people supporting the LGBTQ+ community at board meetings.

"I'd like to thank all of our speakers who continue to come forth. It may be 20 to 25 at times, sometimes it's 16," Facciani said during the meeting, referencing the dozen public comment speakers plus four presenters from Back Creek Elementary School that night.

"I'm pleased that we're still able to exercise our First Amendment rights here and I think it's important that everybody's voices be heard." She then reminded the room, "We still have a majority, which is 50 plus one, and this board will continue to operate as they've been voted for."

Despite the disconnect some residents are feeling with the board over the new LGBTQ+ student policies, Superintendent Ken Nicely said by email Thursday that his frequent school visits show that "Teachers, students, staff, and principals are being very effective in creating and nurturing school and classroom climates in which students can experience a sense of belonging and mutual respect."

"The overall mindset of our staff is that everyone deserves respect, compassion, and care, even as we focus on our primary mission of student learning," he said. "I have not heard any concerns about LGBTQ students not feeling supported at school by staff."

Keely said she's been able to talk with Nicely about options for continuing her education in Roanoke County. Hudson still refuses to speak with her, she said, after initially agreeing to a conversation if her mother were also present.

Keely's mother, Tiffany Sandifer, is proud of her daughter's persistence and passion. Sandifer has spoken in support of LGBTQ+ youth at every school board meeting since June, and she said in an October interview with her daughter that she'll "give free mom hugs" to any Roanoke County student who wants one. "You can always come hang out with us," she said. "If you don't have anybody to talk to ... yes, you do."

And Kerry Shepherd plans to continue advocating for transgender students after Tristan graduates and goes to college. She said that although there's a small group of openly transgender students at Glenvar High — perhaps four or five — there may be more students who are transgender who haven't come out yet.

"They see the bullying that goes on, the dead-naming that goes on" for transgender students at school, Shepherd said, referring to the act of calling someone by a previous name they no longer use. "So some of these kids are waiting" to come out so they don't have to face their fears of dealing with students, their school and the school board and the public.

In the meantime, Keely will be there at board meetings, holding a sign or waving a small rainbow flag. She'll keep talking to the school board members, 3 minutes at a time.