

School board public forum gets heated

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Content

Tensions were high at the April 18 Lancaster County School Board meeting's public forum session.

Of the 15 speakers — six from the same family — violence in schools across the district was the subject of every three-minute statement.

The Lesnefsky family, whose daughter was the subject of a violent text sent by a classmate, has been outspoken in school board meetings and online since the incident occurred in January. Family members said they have continuously asked the district to share the threat assessment protocol that was used in their daughter's specific case, and do not want or expect details about anyone else to be shared.

Among the other speakers was Tonya Ross, who provided context about the possibility of a violent threat or accusation in schools becoming a larger safety event, like a school shooting. While Ross spoke, she handed out folders to each board member.

She recited comments a child might make during a school shooting, and told board members to close their eyes and imagine hearing that, before telling them to open their folders and look inside.

Photos of select board member's children were printed inside the folders.

"I'm going to tell a story to them, and change the narrative and remove them from (their) district 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 seat and put on that hat that they say they're most proud of. That's been (as) a parent, grandparent, or aunt and uncle," Ross said, in explaining her actions afterward. "The story I told was about what if? I changed the scenario to all of the things they're hearing in the room when they hear parents speak time and time again."

Superintendent Dr. Jonathan Phipps said Ross' action was an indirect threat to the board members, and an incident report has been filed with the Lancaster Police Department, at the request of the board members whose children were pictured in the folders.

"I think the public needs to know that, and there ought to be an outcry," he said. "We're better than this as a community. I feel sorry for the board last night, this morning, because I know for a fact that they have some anxiety."

Most board members, including Courtney Green, Casey Catoe, Brad Small, Melvin Stroble, Tyrom Faulkner and Margaret Gamble, declined to comment on it.

Board member Eddie Boykin said that it was "very inappropriate."

"That's not how you conduct civil business," he said. "That's not how you show that...you're trying to be a solution finder. Either you're a part of the problem or you're a part of the solution."

Public forum has had more speakers signing up each month to discuss personal safety incidents they feel were not properly handled, or to show support for parents going through a safety incident with their child.

"We come here every month to demand change for the better," mother Demetra Cornwall said in her statement. "We are respectfully asking you to do your fiduciary duty and please work with us. Don't just hear us up here once a month. Listen to us, every day."

Near the end of the public forum session, after the 12th speaker, Phipps got up and left the room and did not return, causing speculation among parents in the audience about why he left.

"From now on, if the board chooses not to enforce their own policy, the way the public forum should be, I will leave," Phipps said the next morning.

"I don't want our teachers, our educators, our principals to think that they have to take that kind of abuse," he said. "At this point, you're not gonna say anything to me that I'm gonna lose sleep over. But I don't want our educators, (looking) to me leading by example, to think that that's what they're supposed to do."

Board policy states that a district leader cannot be referenced by name or position in a public forum statement, and this rule was broken or close to broken several times by parents during the session. Board Chair Brad Small interrupted statements when this occurred.

Multiple parents in the crowd shouted out that this was not fair, and that district leaders should have to face accountability.

Phipps said that there is a right way and a wrong way to speak to the public and board, and that the last few board meetings have turned into a "free for all."

"I just think there, there's an appropriate way to do it," said Bryan Vaughn, the district's director of safety, communications and transportation. "When you get in there, and when it goes from being about a policy or a procedure into a personal attack, that's when it crosses a line, in my opinion."

Reagan O'Dell, mother of an Indian Land Middle School student, said, "My first request to you, board members, one of many requests that you'll receive this evening, is that the LCSD board policy on harassment, intimidation and bullying be reviewed with each school's administration on an annual basis as an official component at their performance evaluations."

"Don't blindly accept that the policy is actually being followed," O'Dell told board members. "Listen to the testimonies delivered with an open heart, so that you are an example of integrity and moral character to the children and community that you serve."

Board member Melvin Stroble said he is "excited to have members in the community participate in our board meetings. I would just ask them to be mindful that their actions may be viewed by our young citizens, who are watching how we interact with each other as adults. It is important that we model the behaviors we want our children to follow."

At the end of the meeting, board member Tyrom Faulkner said the board is behind district staff "100%."

"So if there's any, any questions about this board supporting our administrators, please let that rest," he said. "I think we all support the administrators of the district, and you're doing a wonderful job and keep up the great work."

Small also expressed his support for district teachers and staff.

"Our educators are teaching the future of our county and country and I know they take great pride in doing this," he said. "I respect what they do on a daily basis for our students."